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Philosophy of Death in Vedanta and Plotinus

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction i

Chapter 1:
Vedanta on Death 1

Chapter 2:
Plotinus on Death 34

Chapter 3:
Vedanta and Plotinus on Death: A Comparative Analysis 59

Conclusion 82

Bibliography 88

Abstract

This thesis is a comparative analysis of the philosophy of Vedanta and Plotinus on the topic of death. It outlines the basic issues in their philosophies of death, including their metaphysical systems, their descriptions of the problem of human suffering as it appears in these systems, their attitudes toward death, their solutions to the problem of human suffering and of death and their visions of death and the afterlife. These philosophies deal with the issue of death on an existential level, presenting a new vision of death based on an authentic lifestyle they inspire people to live. This means that their solution is not purely theoretical but practical. It is also easy to understand and the lifestyle is possible for any person to adopt. Their vision is unique and presents an alternative to the traditional ideas of science and the faith of religion.

Introduction

There are many examples of great contemplators in the history of philosophy. Examples of such great thinkers include the Buddha, Socrates, Marcus Aurelis, John Donne, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. The list is endless. Many of these offer worthwhile insight into death. Yet, two of the outstanding philosophies are exceptionally interesting to study: Vedanta and Plotinus. These two philosophies are worthy of a deeper study for many reasons. First, they offer comprehensive contemplation or philosophies regarding death. Without such philosophical accounts of death, one would simply be forced to accept the explanations of either science or religion; no other alternative would be possible. The ancient philosophical account of death and its existential significance provided by Vedanta and the neo-Platonism of Plotinus offer comparable insight into the connection between death and philosophy.

Also, Vedanta and Plotinus involve the individual in the contemplation of death. The individual is an autonomous entity, not dependent on any outside factors to gain higher knowledge about death, consciousness or reality. There is no heavenly judgment, the right collection of DNA, the right environmental factor or sheer luck necessary to achieve the knowledge of one's self and of true reality. In other words, because of the autonomous quality of the person, these philosophies provide an impetus to learn about the meaning of death and its significance for a thoughtful life.

Furthermore, Vedanta and Plotinus have well-developed theories of metaphysics that they invoke in their study of death. Their cosmologies give an explanation of the nature and structure of reality that can provide a place and a meaning for death.

Understanding of the Ultimate provides the ground for that personal experience, which

offers the proper answer to death. Their epistemologies outline the limitation of human knowledge by shedding light on the limitation of both rational thinking and faith. By understanding the limitations, they are able to point to human ignorance as a source of all troubles, including the fear and the misunderstanding of death.

Their way of looking at life transforms the individual to allow the development of the person's highest potential. Not enslaved by ignorance or its source, the sensory world, the person can become independent, thoughtful and knowledgeable. In a condition such as this, the person can die a deeply thoughtful spiritual death without fear and agony. This allows the person to come closest to the phenomenon of death and learn to practice dying and death in a Platonic sense.

As one learns the art of a liberated life, a new vision of death emerges. From a point of view that goes beyond existence and non-existence, the polar opposite of life and death makes no sense anymore. The natural barrier between existence and non-existence disappears and a new understanding of human fate arises. This understanding represents true freedom from death.

It can be argued that Vedanta and Plotinus' philosophies venture into questionable areas of psychology. Yet, categorizing these philosophies and describing them in such questionable terms do not do any justice to them. It is true that the Vedanta mentions extra-sensory perceptions associated with liberation and that Plotinus' experience of ascent is often described as mystical in nature. However, such descriptions often represent an effort to mystify philosophies that are unusual and totally different from most western philosophies rather than an effort to try to understand and explain them

properly. It is also easier for some to create categories into which philosophies fit nicely. The many “-isms” of western philosophy certainly bear witness to this mentality.

The only way to look at the philosophies of Vedanta and Plotinus is, however, to have an open mind. They are certainly different from the usual; they stand out. Nevertheless, they represent something unique. They share many points of philosophical concerns, including concern about the issue of death. They look at dying, death and the question of the afterlife in similar fashion. It is worth studying them in depth, side by side, because of the overwhelming agreement between them on the issues of and surrounding death. This comparative study can highlight the important message they both try to communicate to those concerned with the mystery of death, which is eventually impossible for anyone to avoid.

As in all comparative studies, there are differences to point out. No two philosophies are ever the same. The differences, as well as the similarities, will emerge as the philosophies are presented one by one. It is practical to start with Vedanta. Vedanta is more distant both in time and mentality from what the western mind is used to. Presenting Plotinus afterwards is easier to digest. Then, the similarities and differences can easily be pointed out.

Since the Katha Upanishad represents one of the classical analyses of death in the Vedic literature, which has a great influence on the later-developed Vedanta, the first chapter starts with the study of this Upanishad. Through a detailed examination of the Katha Upanishad, it is possible to gain access to the mentality of the developing philosophy of death later to be solidified in the comments of the main exponents of Vedanta. Following the Katha Upanishad, the philosophies of the following

commentators are presented: Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. Their analyses point out both the changes, which occurred through the history of the Vedanta and the essential points, which remained unchanged at the core of their philosophies of death.

The second chapter deals entirely with Plotinus. Since he is the philosopher who follows his master, Plato, faithfully, and develops a metaphysical structure to Plato's work, an overall presentation of this main structure is inevitable. It is from his well-structured philosophy that his philosophy of death follows. His unique vision of death emerges by the end of the chapter.

The third chapter completes the picture. The this chapter is essentially a comparative analysis of Vedanta and Plotinus on the subject of death. The previous two chapters introduce their unique views on death. The third chapter presents their similar vision: a society of lost human spirits who are in need of rescuing from false interpretation of death and in need of developing a new vision. A similar lesson of human failure and potential triumph over death can be acquired by the end of the chapter. And, as in all comparative analyses, their marked differences of approach to the problem of death shine through by the time the conclusion is reached.

Chapter 1

Vedanta on Death

One of the classical analyses of death in the Vedic literature is to be found in the Katha Upanishad. Although other Upanishads have discussions on death, the Katha Upanishad is where death becomes personified and takes a central role throughout the discussion. Since death is a universal phenomenon, the Vedantins were bound to express their ideas on the issue sooner or later in their comments on older texts. The main exponents of Vedanta, namely, Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, did so through their commentaries, in which they develop their own versions of the Vedanta, including their own theories of death. Their commentaries on the selected Upanishads include the Katha Upanishad, the examination of which can offer the basis for exposing the Vedanta's standpoint on death.

The Katha Upanishad begins in the form of a story symbolically representing the ultimate knowledge necessary to gain freedom from death. In the story, death is personified by Yama, the god of death, who engages in a dialogue with the protagonist, Naciketas. From a literary point of view, the storyline is very simple: Naciketas arrives in the house of Yama in order to gain knowledge of immortality. Yama educates the boy and Naciketas attains knowledge concerning the meaning of death. The story represents the universal quest for understanding mortal existence.

The story starts with the traditional Vedic people's attitude toward death. The father of Naciketas, Vajasravasa, represents this attitude. The Katha Upanishad opens with the line, "Now, verily, with zeal did Vajasravasa give his whole possession [as religious gift]"¹. This line sums up the basic traditional attitude that sacrifices and rituals

are one of the most important parts of the religious traditions. For Vajasravasa, offering sacrifices to gods is a means to seek favours from them for both this side of life and the other side of it. This is a typical pre-Upanishadic attitude taking place in Vedic rituals as Hiriyanna points to in his book:

This ancient belief is more than a system of rewards and punishments on this side of death. Both the pious and the impious are believed to be born in another world;...The reward of virtue and piety is enjoyment of happiness in heaven in the company of the gods ².

Thus, the father, taking the traditional attitude, hopes to gain the traditional version of a good life on Earth and a place in heaven by the act of sacrifice. It is his hope that, through the acts of sacrifice, his virtues outweigh his vices by the end of his life. He performs his ritualistic act according to traditional recipe. He is the ideal traditional worshipper who is thought to defeat death by his way of worshipping.

As opposed to his father, Naciketas, the son, enters the scene with an entirely new attitude which is revealed in the following entry:

Into him, boy as he was, while the sacrificial gifts were being led up, faith (sraddha) entered. He thought to himself:
‘Their water drunk, their grass eaten,
Their milk milked barren!—
Joyless (a-nanda) certainly are those worlds
He goes to, who gives such [cows]!’ ³

Naciketas is the representative of the new Upanishadic ideas. He sees sacrifices and rituals as ineffective acts by themselves for achieving desired human goals. He realizes that his father’s efforts are not effective if he does not put mental and spiritual energy into such ritual. He argues, in his reference to the giving away of cows, that a sacrifice is meaningless by itself. He sees his father’s action as unsatisfactory and Naciketas yearns for more. This yearning is what can be termed “philosophical knowledge”.

As the story suggests, there is a definite movement away from sacrifices and rituals toward knowledge. In the Vedic people's tradition, the worship of the many gods created a world understood in terms of polytheism. The sacrifices and rituals demonstrate the emphasis on this polytheistic view. However, a world of polytheism is incapable of providing an explanation for a single source in the universe. As Hiriyanna explains in his book, the Vedic people started looking for an underlying unity, trying both henotheism and monotheism unsuccessfully before they found monism ⁴. Since henotheism elevates one god above the many, multiplicity is still present and a final unity cannot be achieved. Monotheism offers one god with the hope of ultimate unity, but it falls short of its promise due to its separation of god and god's creation. Monism is satisfactory because it provides the underlying unity by declaring reality as one. This is the system that the Vedic people in the age of the Upanishad finally found acceptable.

While the theory of multiplicity of gods is easily expressed through the performance of sacrifices and rituals, using physical and symbolic work, the truth of an underlying unity needs a different approach. In order to find unity, a person needs to put a mental effort into the process. Multiplicity is evident in everyday life, but unity needs to be searched out. Naciketas, in the story, represents this new idea that he needs to make a mental effort to find the secrets of the hereafter. He does not know it yet, but his answers will be rooted in the unity provided by monism. At this stage, he simply yearns for knowledge, finding unsatisfactory the sacrifices and rituals performed without a meaningful contemplative energy invested in them. He desires knowledge and he is willing to leave his father's old ways behind to find new answers. His journey into the world of Yama is, therefore, symbolic. It symbolizes a movement away from the old way

of thinking of the universe and a movement toward a new knowledge-based thinking. He simply leaves his ancient ways behind to embark on a new journey.

The journey proceeds into the unknown for Naciketas has no knowledge of what is in the house of Yama. For his father, the sacrifices and rituals represent certainty. They may be performed without any serious contemplative energy invested in them, but the outcome is expected to be certain. For Naciketas, on the other hand, the world of Yama is an uncertain place. Naciketas is uncertain of the outcome of his journey due to the little known world of Yama, but he is feeling certainty about his desire to gain knowledge. His attitude is commendable. He is willing to leave a type of certainty behind that requires little mental effort in order to search for knowledge, not knowing what to expect. He is the ideal sage rarely found in any society, a person who is willing to steer into the world of contemplative thinking.

Once Naciketas arrives at Yama's house, he finds Yama absent. The text does not specify the reason for his absence. However, Yama's absence for three days results in the boy not getting the proper treatment guests usually do. For this reason, Yama offers him three boons for the inconvenience. This part of the story sets the tone for events to follow. Yama is apparently not hostile towards Naciketas. He is portrayed as a friendly host who intends to treat his guests well. His lack of hostility is indicative of the radically different attitude the general population would take toward the personification of death.

Naciketas' first wish is to be able to return to his father and find him cheerful. This symbolizes the value of life. He does not wish to remain in Yama's house. As much as the life beyond death is valued by the people of his time, as their efforts to get to

heaven shows, the emphasis for Naciketas is not on getting there, but on finding the right path on the road of contemplation. Yama grants his first wish and waits for his second. His second wish is to get to know how “...the heaven-world people partake of immortality”⁵. The heaven-world is a belief taken from the early Vedic period where the offerings of sacrifice led to the previously discussed favourable treatment after death. In the spirit of this belief, Yama instructs the boy in the proper sacrifices that needs to be done to attain entrance to the heavens: “Performing the triple work, one crosses over birth and death”⁶.

The second wish does not seem to fit into the mentality of the new system at first sight. The new system emphasizes knowledge and moves beyond sacrifices and rituals. Still, it is important to understand that, at this stage, Naciketas is not enlightened. He desires true knowledge, but he does not yet have it. He is playing safe, relying on a traditional idea of how to get to heaven. Heaven is a place where one can be born again to a more desirable place. He may be ignorant of the truth, but he has a clear desire to do the right thing. This is the importance of the second wish. As opposed to the mechanical observance of sacrifices and rituals, the desire for knowledge shown by Naciketas dominates even in the presence of a clearly demonstrated philosophical ignorance.

As in most fairy tale stories, it is the last wish that becomes the source of all troubles. In this case, Naciketas asks that he be fully educated on the issue of the hereafter:

This doubt that there is in regard to a man deceased:
 ‘He exist’ say some; ‘He exist not,’ say others—
 This would I know, instructed thee!
 Of the boons of this is boon of the third⁷.

Leaving the traditional idea of heaven behind, Naciketas plans to tackle the most problematic question of existence after death. Doubt, as the passage shows, understandably exists in his mind as it does even in the gods, according to Yama. However, Yama is hesitant to offer this boon to the boy. Instead, he encourages the boy to choose something else, such as wealth or long life. Naciketas dismisses Yama's alternatives as ephemeral things, insisting that he be educated on what is immortal.

Unable to talk Naciketas into choosing mortal privileges, Yama is ready to reveal the secret of immortality. The boy is determined to find out the secret of immortality and this symbolic determination is what a person needs to attain true knowledge. Naciketas unknowingly passes a test with his determination. He is willing to leave behind the world of multiplicity and the world of ephemeral things to find the truth. This metaphysical and ethical commitment is the first step toward liberation. He is not even educated yet, but he has already taken a step toward liberation.

Ultimately, the cause of all human troubles is, according to Yama, the attachment to desire and the life of ignorance:

The better (sreyas) is one thing, and the pleasanter (preyas) is quite another.

Both these, of different aim, bind a person.

Of these two, well is it for him who takes the better;

He fails of his aim who chooses the pleasanter ⁸.

Yama, here, refers to two types of human beings: the childish and the wise. The childish person attaches himself or herself to desires and fails to achieve wisdom. As the above quote states, the childish person chooses the pleasanter. The wise person, on the other hand, relinquishes all desires of the worldly kind and focuses on what is better and what leads to wisdom.

The giving up of desires represents a preparation for liberation. The desires are many in number and pull the person in different directions. In the presence of desires such as food, drink, sex, wealth, fame and success, the person is lost in the world. The never-ending desires, many often pulling on the person at the same time, imprisons the person to this world. It is a prison, since constant attention needs to be paid for the satisfaction of these desires. The person's attention is locked up in these desires. If the person wants to free his or her mental powers, it is necessary to eliminate the forces imprisoning the person. Thus, the first step is to take a new approach of letting go of such desires to free the mind.

From a more philosophical viewpoint, the significance of eliminating desires is the ability to free oneself from the multiplicity of the world. Since desires are many, they imprison the person in the world of multiplicity. With multiple desires pulling in multiple directions, the person is unable to free the mind from the presence of a multiple world. Since the world of multiplicity is unable to answer a question on the source of reality, such multiplicity has to be bypassed to see the unity. Of course, if there is a unity, multiplicity is a false appearance of something ultimately real underneath it. To bypass the multiplicity, the person has to train the mind to turn away from it. Thus, from a philosophical point of view, the mind needs to be trained to let go of desires in order to free it from the world of appearance in multiplicity.

The world of appearance versus the world of the undifferentiated real reminds one of Immanuel Kant's philosophy of phenomenon versus noumenon. In fact, the Vedantian system seems to run on the same level of epistemological idealism. The average person's mind perceives the appearance of multiple objects, which is totally different from its real

counterpart apart from the mind. The contrast between Kant's theory and the Upanishadic view is that while Kant's noumena can never be known, true reality of the Upanishadic view can be reached. The text reveals this view:

As water rained upon rough ground
Runs to waste among the hills,
So he who sees qualities (dharma) separately,
Runs to waste after them.
As pure water poured forth into pure
Becomes the very same,
So becomes the soul (atman), O Gautama,
Of the seer (muni) who has understanding ⁹.

The person, symbolically recognized as the water in the passage, sees the phenomenal world of multiplicity that leads him or her astray. As opposed to this, the wise person, symbolicalized as the pure water, reaches true reality after having been purified of the incorrect vision of the phenomenal world. Thus, the Vedanta system, while idealistic, avoids the epistemological problems Kant's noumena run into a couple of thousand years later.

In the story, Yama focuses on the childish individual after having explained the difference between the childish and the wise. Since ignorance and knowledge are exact opposites, those who remain childish, thus ignorant, have a very difficult future existence. The ignorant, unable to see what is real, needs to continue his or her existence in the world of multiplicity. This means that the person needs to transmigrate to this world after death.

Transmigration of the soul makes sense in this context. The person who is liberated from the world can reach the true reality. However, the person who remains ignorant has nowhere to go but back to the world to which he or she is attached. The skeptics may suggest that the ignorant person just ceases to exist. Of course, the western

mind can tolerate such loss. The western world mostly relies on dualistic principles where one entity can be reduced into the other. For example, in epiphenomenalism it is natural to imagine that consciousness is lost at death. Yet, the same is not true in a philosophy built on a Vedantic type of monism. If reality is one and multiplicity is a mistake, no part of reality can be reduced since that is no part to begin with. It is not possible to claim that multiplicity can be reduced to one principle because that would legitimize the existence of multiplicity. Multiplicity is not real; it is a mistake of illusion. Unity is always one. Multiplicity is an epistemological mistake while unity is a metaphysical reality. In such a system, the person may be deluded but cannot disappear. Unable to disappear, the deluded person has only one place to go after death: back to the deluded world to try again.

After death, returning to the world may be immediate, but the text acknowledges intermediate states:

Some go into a womb
For the embodiment of a corporal being.
Others go into a stationary thing
According to their deeds (karman), according to their knowledge”¹⁰.

The karmic system demands that some may spend some time in an intermediate place, returning to the world after a brief rest. Having done some good work in this world, the person may receive some joy before the continuation of serious work again. The person is fitted with a body after the rest based on the degree of ignorance. Two things are important to note, here. First, the person may gradually develop and does not necessarily start from the same place at every reincarnation. Second, there seems to be several layers of phenomenal worlds before one reaches true reality, which includes the material world, the afterlife resting place and the source of all these worlds, the real underneath. There

seems to be a well-designed system to move the developing individual through several layers of reality before returning to the source. There is a lot of room for philosophical speculation.

The important lesson at this moment is that which Naciketas learns. It is important to avoid rebirth and the only way to achieve it is by liberation through true knowledge. Ignorance is attributed to multiplicity and liberation to unity. What Naciketas is missing at this point is the means of liberation. Yama turns to that lesson next. He reveals that renunciation of the sensory world and meditation on the self are the required steps for liberation. Since the sensory world represents ignorance, turning away from it is the first lesson. Detachment from the world means a change in the center of mental activity. The ignorant person's mental attention is centered on the outside world. The mental energy flows from inside to the outside. When detached from the world, the mental attention is directed inward. The mental energy does not flow away from the person. As Yama explains,

[t]he Self-existent (svayambhu) pierced the openings (of the senses)
outward;
Therefore one looks outward, not within himself (antaratman).
A certain wise man, while seeking immortality,
Introspectively beheld the Soul (Atman) face to face ¹¹.

Detachment from the world ensures that mental attention is directed inward. No longer desiring the multiplicity of the world outside helps one to stay introspective. Still, introspection, in the form of meditation, is further needed. Meditation is needed to discover the inner self of the individual. This inner self is called "Atman", which is the unqualified soul that exists apart from all description. When meditating, this is what the inner self reveals; it seems to be beyond all description. It simply exists beyond time,

space and causation. It is indestructible. When meditating long enough, the inner self reveals its secret of immortality.

Moreover, meditation reveals that the same source is responsible for the reality behind both the inner self and the phenomenal world. “So the one Inner Soul (antaratman) of all things is corresponding in form to every form, and yet is outside” ¹². Unity prevails both on the outside world and the inner world. The same unity embraces both. Actually, there are no outer and inner worlds; for that, a dualistic type of reality would be necessary. There is just unity prevailing upon the whole. When it is referred to the totality, it is called “Brahman”; when referred to the self, it is called “Atman”. Thus, Brahman is both imminent and transcendent. It also exists beyond all qualities and ignorance.

In the final analysis, reality is inconceivable. Meditation can lead the person to a state of mind where it is possible to grasp reality in a liberated state, but it is beyond all intellectual efforts. It is very important to understand two things, here. First, reaching Brahman cannot be taught. The goal is to reach the transcended Brahman. This is what liberation means. Yet, reaching does not mean knowing in any regular sense. As Yama tells the boy in the story, there is a condition of knowing the Atman-Brahman reality. He states, “[t]his Soul (Atman) is not to be obtained by instruction, [n]or by intellect, nor by much learning” ¹³. Even though Yama insists that the proper teacher instruct the one ready to be liberated, actually, the skill of liberation cannot be taught. It can only be acquired by the student who has taken the necessary steps. The teacher can show the path, but the student has to walk it on his or her own.

Second, reaching Brahman is not an intellectual exercise. The reference to intellect and learning in the above quotation means to show that all regular channels of knowing ultimately fail. Since Brahman is without quality, one cannot perceive Brahman or make inferences about it. Similarly, it is impossible to reason about Brahman. All human and scientific efforts fail. Those who follow the regular path of learning are considered ignorant in this case. The regular channels of learning are not useless; they are simply inferior to the way Brahman is known. The product of the regular channels of learning will always result in finding the phenomenal world, while the product of knowing Brahman results in finding what is real behind the phenomenal world.

Knowing Brahman is always superior to any other way of knowing. Therefore, it is even doubtful that the word “knowing” or “knowledge” in the usual sense is appropriate to use in relation to Brahman. In the state of knowing Brahman, what is normally referred to as “knowing” or “knowledge” does not exist. Reaching Brahman or the knowledge of Brahman, also called “Jnana”, is a direct experience in which the student participates as opposed to receiving it as any kind of information. Nevertheless, whatever word one uses to designate the path to Brahman, it consists of a knowledge greater than any regular channels of knowing.

Having outlined the conditions of reaching Atman-Brahman, Yama warns Naciketas about the extraordinary discipline required for success. He outlines the soul’s relationship to other components in a parable of a chariot. The soul is driving in a chariot, which is the body. The intellect (buddhi) is the chariot-driver, the mind (manas) is the reins, the senses (indriya) are the horses, and, the object of senses are what the horse-pulled chariot ranges over. The combination of soul, mind and senses make up the

person existing in the world. The person who is ignorant with an uncontrolled mind dominated by unrestrained senses is compared to an out of control chariot with vicious horses on board. On the other hand, the wise person, who has understanding, a firm mind and well-controlled senses, is compared to a well-disciplined chariot pulled by good horses. Yama's point is to demonstrate the importance of discipline. The senses need to be trained by the mind, which needs to be firm and led by the intellect. Only a well-disciplined and well-balanced individual can succeed on the path to Brahman.

The parable of the chariot bears an uncanny resemblance to Plato's tri-parts theory of the soul.¹⁴ In Plato's theory, the intelligence is replaced by reason, the mind is replaced by the assertive part of the self and the senses are simply referred to as appetites. Still, the lesson is the same. Reason needs to lead the person and the assertive part needs to hold the appetites in check. Even though the two chariot analogies are worlds apart, it seems that the effort of liberation, in order to achieve a more noble goal, is mutually recognized. Discipline, as Yama warns Naciketas, is the key step toward success.

In Yama's world, success of liberation means not having to reincarnate. Yama puts it this way:

[h]e, however, who has not understanding,
 Who is unmindful and ever impure,
 Reaches not the goal,
 But goes on to reincarnation (samsara)
 He, however, who has understanding,
 Who is mindful and ever pure,
 Reaches the goal
 From which he is born no more ¹⁵.

Success frees the person from death and releases the soul from under the control of Yama. The liberated person views life from a different perspective. There is no longer any fear of death due to the unknown because there is no unknown. The person sees

from the point of view of the unqualified Brahman, which is beyond all fears, all concerns and all struggles. The struggle against death is over since the person is beyond such struggle now.

This means that death loses its meaning. It no longer represents the same type of barrier as it does for the ignorant person. The ignorant person understands death as the natural barrier between existence in the world and the great unknown. The wise person sees it differently. For the wise person the barrier is not between life in the world and the beyond, but between ignorance and liberation. The liberated person is released from the power of Yama at the moment of liberation. Freedom from repeated death is ensured. The liberated person has to wait for physical death to occur in order to separate from the world of multiplicity for the last time. However, he or she is already free as a bird while waiting for the final step. That person can no longer be a guest in Yama's house.

Being liberated seems to be a privileged state to be in. From the instruction of Yama, one gets a sense that few people reach the state of liberation. This may be the case amongst the people in the waking state of mind, but Yama gives a hint that even the larger population is not a stranger to liberation. When he talks to Naciketas about the real inner Person, he mentions that the inner Person is "[h]e who is awake in those that sleep."¹⁶ He also mentions in passing that the soul, Atman, is whereby "...one perceives both the sleeping state and the waking state."¹⁷ From these passages, it can be concluded that the inner soul, Atman, is present in the sleeping state and exists beyond the waking and sleeping states. In other Upanishads, it is specifically stated that the person exists in a dreamless state where he or she returns to the true soul.¹⁸ This means that all people are returned to Atman when in deep sleep and all are liberated. Symbolically, all people die

every night. Perhaps, this is the purpose of “non-rapid-eye-movement sleep”, or “NREM” sleep, that puzzles psychologists. The need for unconscious liberation drives the person into deep sleep.

This state is temporary, though. The prison of the phenomenal world remains as long as the person’s consciousness is attached to it. Thus, even though all people are free every night, only some are truly liberated from this world. And, conscious liberation is the preferable type since that is the only kind that can lead to freedom from repeated deaths. “When are cut all [t]he knots of the heart here on earth, [t]hen a mortal becomes immortal!”¹⁹.

The story of Naciketas’ education ends on a positive note. Naciketas returns to his father fully educated by death. He has all the tools necessary for liberation. When returning, he practices Yoga and attains liberation. Liberated, he is free from death. Ironically, this means that he never has a chance to meet Yama, his instructor, again. The story’s last line ends with inspiration: “Attained Brahma and became free from passion, free from death [a]nd so may other who knows this in regard to the Soul (Atman)”²⁰.

The exponents of the major Vedanta schools, Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva base their interpretations on their representative understanding of the Upanishads. Sankara’s interpretation of death bears close resemblance to the previously outlined Katha Upanishad. First, Sankara explains that the true self is the unqualified self that cannot be equated with the sensory ego. The self is a subject, which cannot be identified as an object. It cannot have qualities the same way objects can. If a person talks about qualities in relation to the self, that person is pointing to the ego, falsely understanding it as the true self due to ignorance. Thus, knowledge means being aware of the

unqualified self and ignorance means being solely aware of qualified self. This is the same argument used by Yama to describe multiplicity as false perception and unity as true perception.

Sankara heavily relies on the concept of the self. He treats the self as the starting point of all observations. He says:

[m]oreover, the existence of Brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self of every one. For every one is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks 'I am not'. If the existence of the Self were not known, every one would think 'I am not'. And this Self (of whose existence all are conscious) is Brahman ²¹.

Having come very close to a Cartesian start of certainty in knowledge using Descartes' now famous point of departure, "I think, therefore, I am", Sankara deviates from it right away by identifying the self with Brahman. The ground of existence is expressed in both Atman when referred to the self and Brahman when referred to the world upon which the phenomenal world rests. This means that Sankara also agrees with another key concept presented in the Katha Upanishad, namely, the Atman-Brahman principle.

Furthermore, Sankara's statement on the Atman-Brahman principle also suggests that assimilation into Brahman is his main objective. As long as the self remains at the empirical level, the level of the lower self, it is considered ignorant. On this level, the true nature of the self cannot be expressed. Once it is freed from the sense organs and the mind, it becomes its higher self, identifying with the pure Atman-Brahman principle. Being aware of the assimilation into Brahman, the self knows that it is no longer part of the transmigratory existence the lower selves are condemned to. Hence, Sankara's definition of the self, his identification of Atman-Brahman and his goal of assimilation of

Atman into Brahman have the same result of freedom from transmigration of the soul as in the Katha Upanishad.

Besides using a unique method to arrive at a similar conclusion as his predecessors, Sankara adds interesting details to the discussion of death. He analyzes, for example, both the person's failure and success of achieving liberation from repeated death. He insists that, if the person is not liberated, being born into the phenomenal world becomes necessary. "But, when such obstruction takes place, then, in the next life [it continues]," he says ²². Knowledge matures in a person's life. However, if that knowledge is obstructed in any way, maturity may be delayed. Having already done good work, the person, after death, enters the "world of the blessed" and is born again into a good family.

Being in a better circumstance, the individual has a chance to mature. If the person is still not matured enough to be liberated, he or she transmigrates into the next life using the lower self. The higher self cannot participate in the transmigration because it is part of the pure Atman-Brahman principle. Only the defective lower part can be caught up in the phenomenal world to falsely perceive that world. The phenomenal world appears real to the ignorant lower self, but less than real to the higher self. Although the phenomenal world is real or unreal only in comparison depending on whether one adopts the point of view of the higher self or the lower self, the aim of the lower self is to identify with the point of view of the higher self. While ignorant, the lower self is that part, which suffers the repeated imprisonment of the phenomenal world while trying to mature in order to escape that phenomenal world and to embrace the "less than real" point of view of the higher self. This is the fate of the maturing self.

The identity of the lower self consists of a false perception of the self. The lower self is the ego or “jiva”, which incorrectly identifies itself with the body. The ego sees itself as a separate entity standing in opposition to the world. Hiriyaana explains this point:

From this wrong identification arise all confusion and troubles in life...It is this complex entity again, which presupposes avidya or ignorance, that transmigrates—a fact which implies that liberation, which depends upon overcoming of ignorance, is transcending the notion of ego. Thus, paradoxical, as it may seem, man, truly to be himself, must get beyond himself²³.

This means that even though the body is dropped at death, the falsely identified self continues on into another body. Due to ignorance of its true self, the ego repeats its existence in different bodies until liberation. Only when the ego can get beyond itself can the process of transmigration stop.

While the ego is in full force of its ignorance, the person cannot be saved from repeated deaths. While in western religions and philosophical theories, the person can be forgiven and granted a place in purgatory or heaven, Vedanta points to the phenomenal world as the source of deception. The phenomenal world is where the ego is at home and the only place where it is capable of being enlightened. It is the phenomenal world, which hides the real world or, using the Kantian term, the neumenal world. The same way, it is the phenomenal self, the ego, which hides the neumenal self, Atman. It is in this world that the mistake can and has to be recognized. There are no other worlds where this ignorance can be overcome. It is here where the Atman-Brahman principle can and will be realized in all human beings. Until then, repeated deaths are an inevitable part of the system.

While the fate of the ignorant is sealed to the phenomenal world, the life of the liberated continues on a different path. While it may be easy to describe what happens to the fully liberated person who dies for the final time, it is more difficult to express the state of the person who is liberated but still in the body, not physically dead yet. Sankara recognizes the difficulty as he tries to explain that state of Atman-Brahman in an enlightened person living in the phenomenal world. He contemplates that if, in such a person, the self and Brahman were different, two substances would be present in reality. This cannot be since reality is unity. Yet, they cannot be non-different either because if they were, they would be indistinguishable. At the end, he realizes that this may be a contradiction from the point of view of the ignorant individuals who use traditional logic and language. He maintains, on the other hand, that this contradiction no longer exists in a liberated individual. In the new state of liberation, reason and language disappear, giving their place to a higher state of knowledge. The contradiction simply dissolves into the indescribable state of Brahman rooted in a higher state of knowledge. In this sense, the state of liberation ends in the mystical.

According to Sankara, such a liberated state means that the person does not see the limitation of the world or distinguish between the world and Brahman even though he or she is still in the body. Sankara himself states that, “[in] this manner the Vedanta-texts declare that for him who has reached the state of truth and reality the whole apparent world does not exist”.²⁴ In other words, while the ignorant treats the content of the phenomenal world as real, this mistake does not happen to the liberated. The liberated person understands that possessing a state of consciousness in which the phenomenal world is thought to be real, is in itself real. However, the liberated never makes the

mistake of identifying with that state of consciousness. In short, the framework of such consciousness is real for the liberated, but not the content of it. Thus, the apparent world, according to Sankara, disappears for the liberated.

The distinction between content and framework has consequences. On the ethical side, for example, the person lives without producing further karma while still suffering from the influences of previous karma. Since the concept of good and evil belongs to the phenomenal world, standing outside of the reality of the phenomenal world makes it impossible for the liberated person to acquire further karma. However, this does not prevent him or her from suffering from previously acquired karma. As Sankara himself claims:

[t]hose works, on the other hand, whose effects have begun and whose results have been half enjoyed—i.e., those very works to which there is due the present state of existence in which the knowledge of Brahman arises—are not destroyed by that knowledge²⁵.

This situation puts the liberated person in a peculiar position. He or she is already beyond the fate of repeated deaths and is aware of this fact, yet he or she appears to be ignorant to other ignorant individuals. Ignorant individuals are unable to identify him as liberated since he appears no different from anybody else. The consequence of being liberated means, therefore, a state of vulnerability to the skepticism. This is a situation where the skeptical philosophers who are ignorant themselves do not see any difference between the ignorant and the liberated—a difference between those who escaped deaths and those who did not—arguing that there is nothing to the story of liberation.

Yet, the new state of liberation does offer the liberated a new way of existing. Through their direct experience, the liberated individuals have true knowledge of reality, including both life and death. Accordingly, in such knowledge, death loses its meaning.

Freedom from transmigration renders death meaningless. The fear is gone and the threat of death has disappeared. Death, instead of being conquered, has simply been allowed to leave.

Sankara's interpretation of death makes enlightenment largely dependent on the acceptance of the Atman-Brahman principle and the ability for a person to assimilate into Brahman. As his own statement reveals, quoting the ancient texts, "Not so, not so", he believes in a qualITLESS Brahman, which the person reaches to in liberation²⁶. Since this state of the qualITLESS Brahman can never be reduced to a state of annihilation, the interpretation of death stays faithful to the original text of the Katha Upanishad. Sankara only expands on the theory by adding much needed details of the life of the liberated and their vision of death before the inevitable arrives.

To see a different interpretation of the philosophy of the Katha Upanishad, one has to turn to Ramanuja. His interpretation differs mainly for the reason that he adopts a different worldview. For Ramanuja, knowledge points to different classes of things. While Sankara identifies Brahman as the only reality, everything else being due to false perception, Ramanuja calls attention to the fact that consciousness indicates a subject. The content of consciousness may be false, but the subject of consciousness needs to be present and real to lead the person to true knowledge. "The judgment 'I am conscious' reveals an 'I' distinguished by consciousness."²⁷ This "I" "...persists on the cessation of ignorance;"²⁸. Consequently, this "I" persisting as subject of consciousness has its own genuine existence.

The genuine existence of the subject of consciousness indicates three classes of things. Subject of consciousness denotes conscious beings, thus, the selves. Outside of

conscious beings are the non-conscious beings, which he commonly refers to as “the world”. Selves and the world, together, make up the body of the highest Brahman. The selves and the world are dependent on Brahman, but Brahman is independent and does not need to rely on the selves or the world.

With these classes of things in existence, Ramanuja seems to have broken the unity of the world. Yet, he insists this is not the case. He states:

“But what all these texts deny is only plurality in so far as contradicting that unity of the world which depends on its being in its entirety an effect of Brahman, and having Brahman for its inward ruling principle and its true Self” ²⁹.

This means that, as long as Brahman’s unity is unaffected, plurality is not an issue.

Hiriyanna refers to this idea in his book as qualified non-dualism ³⁰. He also calls Ramanuja’s philosophical stand “Brahma-parinama-vada”, meaning the acceptance of the transformation of Brahman, as opposed to Sankara’s “Brahma-vivarta-vada”, meaning the world is the phenomenal appearance of Brahman ³¹. The point is that the unity, according to Ramanuja, is maintained by the unity of Brahman. Yet, duality can also be maintained outside the self-sustained substance.

Ramanuja’s new worldview has a dramatic effect on the theory of death. The relationship changes between Brahman and the self, liberation gains new meaning and death and transmigration need to adopt different rules. First, changes in relationship between Brahman and the self are necessary due to the self’s inability to assimilate into Brahman. Brahman is self-sustained, unchanging and qualified. For Ramanuja, unqualified Brahman does not exist. Self is, on the other hand, the body of Brahman. It is sustained by Brahman and, as such, has the ability to change and possesses certain

qualities. Due to its nature, the “I” of the self never assimilates into Brahman, but remains conscious subject for eternity.

Of course, the self’s failure is due to ignorance in Ramanuja’s theory. However, due to the changes in relationship between Brahman and the self, ignorance takes up a new meaning. Here, the embodied self views itself as a material entity unaware of its true essential nature. Ramanuja says:

“...the embodied selves, being engrossed by ignorance in the form of good and evil works, do not recognize their essential nature, which is knowledge, but view themselves as having the character of material things”³².

The knowledge that the self requires to eliminate ignorance is knowledge of the qualified Brahman. This can be achieved by meditation on Brahman. The result is liberation from transmigration and an eternal existence as a conscious self with Brahman. Brahman and the self will, of course, remain separate entities. Brahman can never be part of the self since the self is capable of ignorance, which can never be true of Brahman. Brahman’s true being never changes; only the self is capable of moving from ignorance to liberation. Separation of the self from Brahman is maintained even in liberation.

To regain the essential self by gaining knowledge of Brahman is possible, as stated, through meditation. Meditation has a different connotation, though, from that of Sankara’s or Yama’s. For Sankara and the Katha Upanishad, meditation means using the technique of Yoga to gain knowledge of Brahman. Preliminary exercises such as detachment from the world and moral purity are necessary, but the emphasis is always on knowledge. The polar opposite of ignorance is knowledge; knowledge is solely what an individual needs. Ramanuja sees the role of meditation and the goal of liberation differently. Meditation of the kind advised by Sankara and the Katha Upanishad, to gain

knowledge of Brahman, by itself is not enough. Liberation is an integrated effort of moral purity, knowledge of Brahman and devout meditation. For Ramanuja, there is a great emphasis on "...the devout meditation of the worshipper."³³ The reason for that emphasis is to move the importance of knowledge out of the spotlight. The de-emphasis of knowledge leads to a more balanced integrated activity eliminating the obsession with knowledge.

Since devotion becomes part of the technique of liberation, the individual's role changes in the process. With Sankara and Yama, the person needs to take full responsibility for the future. Whether the person ends up in the cycle of transmigration after death or is liberated before death depends solely on that person. Ramanuja's concept of devotion changes this sense of responsibility. Since it is Brahman who "blesses" the obedient with the final release, part of the responsibility shifts to Brahman who is now thought of as a personified deity. Ramanuja writes that, "...the cessation of such bondage is to be obtained only through the grace of the highest Self pleased by the devout meditation of the worshipper,"³⁴. Brahman offers its grace only to the devoted individual. Grace is the part of the nature of Brahman. The responsibility is such that Brahman cannot deny the grace from the person whose devout meditation is appropriate. Brahman blesses the obedient automatically, without ever being deficient. This way Brahman is merciful and loving. Even though the individual is required to put effort into the liberation, Brahman affects the process of liberation as a decent and fair deity.

In a joint effort, liberation happens in Ramanuja's theory. The timing of such liberation is, however, disputable. Since the self is the body of Brahman, it is not possible for the self to enter into a different state of being while alive and to cease being

the body of Brahman. This means that the only possibility for the person is to wait until physical death to enjoy such liberation. It is not clear whether Brahman offers his grace throughout the person's life or at the moment of death, but it is clear that the fruits of such labour cannot be enjoyed before death.

If the person is not liberated at all, transmigration becomes inevitable. The place the person ends up in the new life depends, as always, on the person's karma. Good and evil actions are constantly accumulated and carried into new transmigrations. The only way a person can stop such accumulation is by liberation. Unlike in Sankara, in Ramanuja's theory the liberated person does not lift himself or herself beyond good and evil. In his theory, the liberated person continues to engage himself or herself in good actions. This is necessary since moral purity is part of the condition for release from bondage. The liberated person cannot be without such purity. Naturally, the liberated individual does not need to put too much effort into good actions. Good actions automatically arise in such a person. The liberated person automatically channels through the ultimate good of Brahman. Thus, karma does not cease to exist at the moment of liberation as it is in Sankara's theory.

Ramanuja's philosophy is based on certain passages in the Katha Upanishad and can be directly supported by it. Grace, for example, is mentioned in Yama's conversation with Naciketas. Yama, when talking about the revelation of Atman, declares, "[w]hen through the grace of the Creator he beholds the greatness of the Soul (Atman)"³⁵. It is true that Robert Ernest Hume, in the Thirteen Principle Upanishad, interprets the word "grace" as tranquility of the senses, but he admits that other translations and interpretations are possible. Either way, grace does enter into the picture of liberation.

Furthermore, Yama mentions that one of the conditions of acquiring Atman is that “[h]e is to be obtained only by the one whom he chooses; [t]o such a one that Soul (Atman) reveals his own person”³⁶. Unmistakably, this idea fits into Ramanuja’s theory that liberation from bondage and death is not entirely up to the person. Whether Ramanuja or Sankara is right in this instance is up for debate, but there certainly is opportunity for alternative interpretations based on at least some parts of the Katha Upanishad.

Ramanuja surely changes the conditions and process of death, but not nearly as much as Madhva. Madhva completely breaks the rule of maintaining unity of reality. He states in his discussion on reality:

The view of absolute identity cannot be taken; for the text, ‘He who sees the Lord worshipped by the gods as different from himself and understands his glory,’ declares the difference (between the self worshipping and the Lord worshipped)³⁷.

This means that the world is made of two completely different substances. On the one hand, there is Brahman who is superior and, on the other hand, there are selves and matter clearly inferior to Brahman. Thus, in this instance, reality has become, dualistic in nature. The superior substance of Brahman exists in a separate sphere from selves and matter. Brahman solely denotes Vishnu in Ramanuja’s philosophy who is elevated to this state at the expense of other known gods in Hindu faith. In its separation, Vishnu, as Brahman, can remain in its purity, divided from the impure substance.

The concept of death in such a world needs to be looked at differently. Transmigration is not denied by Madhva. Karma is accumulated and carried through existence. The familiar notion of liberation of the soul through Brahman is also present. However, the method of liberation is very different. Since Brahman is the superior substance, the inferior human being is powerless in his or her salvation. The only action

the person can take is preparation for full devotion to Brahman. The person can study holy texts with devotion, acquire a morally right character and resign his or her being to Brahman. Still, this is only the preparation phase. The integrated activity to achieve the actual liberation, which is so important to Ramanuja, is absent in Madhva's philosophy. Actual liberation happens when this integrated preparatory phase is over. When all preparation is done, the person needs to tirelessly worship Brahman in complete devotion to Brahman. Such worship brings salvation for the person and this salvation means liberation itself.

Brahman alone can liberate the person. Karma and preparatory exercises are needed, but Brahman alone has the power to liberate. Brahman is the sole provider of all. It provides knowledge and righteousness and to the fully devoted one, final release. The release can happen any time during a person's life since the self is an independent substance Brahman has complete power over. There is no need to wait until physical death occurs. Thus, Brahman is the final answer to everything. Final liberation means that the freed self takes delight in the adoration and worshipping of God and remains a separate conscious entity with God for all eternity.

On final analysis, all three commentators, Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, interpret death based on their worldviews. Sankara remains faithful to the Katha Upanishad's explanation of death because he accepts the principle of Brahman-vivarta-vada. Since liberation ends in the mystical, Brahman is never talked about in terms of substance. This helps to keep Sankara's interpretation simple without resorting to metaphysical jargon. Substance is a friend of the metaphysician who would like to see the world supported by a tangible matter. Sankara is not a metaphysician in this sense.

He is a philosopher who embraces a type of monism that ends in an unqualified, inexpressible and pure realm that designates the real. This real is not a substance. It is beyond any substance. The real is found beyond any and all substances. Brahman-vivarta-vada requires one step out of the phenomenal world where it is no longer possible to talk of substances. Therefore, his worldview allows a connection to the real, which falls outside of the traditional world of a metaphysician obsessed by a reality of tangible matter. After all, metaphysical concepts related to substance are created by traditional knowledge, which does not describe Brahman.

His simple methodology avoids metaphysical concepts and puts emphasis on the manner in which the real can be found. It is not the “what” but the “how” that is important to him. He wishes to free human beings from their limited conditions such as the condition of fear of death and the actual repetition of both the fear and the event. His vision is a recipe for ultimate freedom rather than a source of metaphysical debate. Unfortunately, this avoidance of metaphysical concepts does not continue in Ramanuja’s philosophy. Ramanuja manages to start up an unwanted metaphysical contemplation. He introduces “substance” into the discussion. He asks that consciousness be acknowledged as a real and existing subject. In other words, he wants consciousness to be an independent substance. Once consciousness becomes a real and, at the same time, a defective substance due to its presence in the world, the distance between the real and pure and the real and defective is forever to remain. The traditional dualistic problem arises as to how to overcome the gap. A metaphysical debate begins there.

In reality, Ramanuja never solves the problem of the gap. He simply places human beings into the position of becoming the body of God. This creates a unique

relationship between them, but it never eliminates the gap. In death, Ramanuja is forced to keep the conscious human being a separate entity for eternity. Furthermore, the human being is now forced to wait for liberation until death as a result of the intimate but separate existence in God. The emphasis is still on human freedom, but now this freedom inescapably tied up in the metaphysical structure that Ramanuja has created.

Finally, Madhva delivers the ultimate transition from a philosophy free of metaphysics to a philosophy based on metaphysical interpretation. Madhva introduces the dualism, which sharply divides the world into two different substances. This time the two substances are not even measured on an equal ground. The self is not even considered the body of God as it is in Ramanuja's theory. The self is a separate and inferior substance. The superior substance rules over this inferior substance. The inferior substance exists at the mercy of the superior substance. The gap is now infinitely large.

Madhva does not even try to solve the problem of the gap. He separates God from human beings and keeps them apart. The unique relationship between them completely becomes a dualistic kind and, therefore, they are no longer connected on a deeper level. Freedom from death is still possible, but it is now viewed as a gift from a superior power to the inferior substance. Human being is rendered powerless in his or her salvation. The worldview of Madhva forces him to place human freedom from death into the metaphysical structure of substances he creates.

The transition is complete. Sankara's metaphysically free structure constituting of no substances, in order to achieve freedom from death, has turned into a freedom, which is now reshaped to fit into Madhva's metaphysical structure built by a variety of substances. Sankara warns his audience that Brahman is beyond all metaphysical

concepts. Brahman cannot be placed into any traditional metaphysical systems, which are based on substance, because It exists beyond all of them. Yet, Ramanuja and Madhva ignore the message and develop such systems into which they place Brahman. The limitation they impose on Brahman directly affects their explanations of human destiny beyond death. Once the gap is created, human freedom is limited by this gap. The limitation shapes the human destiny into a seriously dependent and helpless existence, which the human spirit aims to avoid right from the beginning.

Before one condemns, though, the deterioration of the original solution to death, it is important to realize that all three commentators achieve the most important task: they reform the human individuals into their true selves. Metaphysics or no metaphysics, human beings are transformed into their genuine human selves. All commentators inspire to turn human beings away from the world that corrupts them and deliver them into their genuine selves to attain ultimate freedom from death. The manner in which they attempt to do this is different. Sankara emphasizes knowledge, Ramanuja creates an integrated activity, which also includes moral purity and devout meditation and Madhva considers devotion to God as the only means. Yet, all these philosophies have transformational powers. They all urge humans to leave their corrupt ways behind.

All three commentators conceive human beings as unenlightened creatures who exist apart from their own selves. The world has corrupted them metaphysically and ethically to see both the world and themselves in a way other than what they truly are. The task is to transform them out of the false perception. The world needs to be left behind as the ignorant and childish people know it and it needs to be embraced in a new light. This new light takes the person into a new realm unknown to the unenlightened

people where the appropriate vision of death emerges. Since the new realm is always expressed in terms of a mysterious world ground, reaching it ensures that death is no longer the fearful event that the corrupt world suggests. Death is now an event that opens up the possibility of starting again or the possibility of connecting to the mystery, which unfolds from the vision of the true human self. This can be called mystical for the psychologically oriented. It can be also be called “the hidden”, which is uncovered by the naked self, for the more philosophically minded.

Whatever the process is called, it creates a new vision of death. Death is to be feared only for those who identify themselves with the world capable of corrupting. Death is meaningless for those who acquire the new vision. Death is a chance for a new existence in one form or another. If enlightened, death is freedom from this world and freedom to a better one. What shape it takes differs from commentator to commentator, but the message of freedom from death is certainly there. Annihilation becomes a fantasy of the ignorant and the wise embraces the new existence of freedom. Death is dismissed by the wise person for the final time.

At the end, the message can be expressed in a single idea. This single idea was inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know thyself!” Even if one wants to know about the world or things in the world, it is still necessary to first start with the self. Death is not an exception.

Notes:

¹ Robert Ernest Hume (trans.), The Thirteen Principle Upanishads, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), Katha Upanishad I. 1., p. 341, Subsequently abbreviated as TPU

² M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 8th ed., 1970), p. 46

³ Katha, I. 2-3, TPU, p. 341

⁴ M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines*, p. 38

⁵ Katha, I. 13, TPU, p. 343

⁶ Katha, I. 17, TPU, p. 344

⁷ Katha, I. 16, TPU, p. 344

⁸ Katha, II. 1, TPU, p. 344

⁹ Katha, IV. 14-15, TPU, p. 355

¹⁰ Katha, V. 7, TPU, p. 357

¹¹ Katha, IV. 2, TPU, p. 353

¹² Katha, V. 9, TPU, p. 357

¹³ Katha, II. 23, TPU, p. 350

¹⁴ Plato, The Republic of Plato, F. MacDonald Conford, trans., (London: Oxford University Press, 57th ed., 1975), pp. 131-138

¹⁵ Katha, III. 7-8, TPU, p. 352

¹⁶ Katha, V. 8, TPU, p. 357

¹⁷ Katha, IV. 4, TPU, p. 354

¹⁸ Brihad., IV. 3. 21, TPU, p. 136

¹⁹ Katha, VI. 15, TPU, p. 361

²⁰ Katha, VI. 18, TPU, p. 361

²¹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, ed., "Vedanta" in A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 12th ed., 1989), p. 511, Subsequently abbreviated as SIP.

²² SIP, p. 540

²³ M. Hiriyanna, The Essentials of Indian Philosophy, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 7th ed., 1969), p. 165

²⁴ SIP, p. 531

²⁵ SIP, p. 542

²⁶ SIP, p. 538

²⁷ SIP, p. 547

²⁸ SIP, p. 547

²⁹ SIP, p.549

³⁰ Hiriyanā, Outlines, p. 408

³¹ Hiriyanā, Outlines, p. 67

³² SIP, p. 549

³³ SIP, p. 552

³⁴ SIP, p. 552

³⁵ Katha, II. 20, TPU, p. 350

³⁶ Katha, II. 24, TPU, p. 350

³⁷ SIP, p. 560

Chapter 2

Plotinus on Death

According to Pierre Hadot, “[t]he modern reader who opens Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* cannot help but feel a certain uneasiness”¹. Plotinus seems to be a bizarre character who is often accused of being sleep deprived, having a deplorable diet, not taking elementary hygienic measures, running away from life and suffering from a melancholic syndrome². Given his seemingly bizarre character, what can a man like Plotinus possibly teach about death? In spite of his seemingly strange character, Plotinus has a lot to say about death. Although his main concern is to clarify the destiny of the soul and the structure of reality, Plotinus makes statements about death, which, together with his theory of the soul and reality, can be identified as a complete philosophy of death.

Plotinus, being a Neoplatonist, builds his philosophy based on his peculiar view of his master, Plato. Yet, having lived about 500 years later than his master, Plotinus’ work also incorporates elements from philosophies of later ages such as from Aristotelianism and Stoicism. His reaction against Gnosticism also shapes his ideas. All in all, his philosophy is a unique combination of ideas, which includes a complete theory on the topic of death.

Plato gives an important place for the soul in his writings and, similarly, Plotinus makes the soul a central focus of his philosophy. In fact, this is where he starts his philosophy. Examining sense perception, he finds that the senses are unreliable and defective. Since the body belongs to this unreliable and defective world and, yet, intimately connected to the soul, the soul needs to be superior to it. The body is defective

because it is divisible, but the soul is superior because it is indivisible and capable of unity as the act of perception proves. Thus, the soul's superiority, as he establishes at the beginning, drives Plotinus' philosophy. The soul becomes the key to all philosophical problems.

It is easiest to start with the body part of the body-soul relationship in Plotinus' system to see how he builds his philosophy of death. When the body is connected to the soul, it achieves a certain unity through the soul's superior ability. Without the soul, however, it is just disorganized matter. This disorganized matter takes the lowest form in Plotinus' system, as Plotinus explains in his work, Enneads:

Matter, then is incorporeal, since body is posterior and a composite, and matter with something else produces body...It is not soul or intellect or life or form or rational formative principle or limit...but, falling outside all these, it could not properly receive the title of being but would appropriately be called not-being,...it is a ghostly image of bulk, a tendency towards substantial existence; it is static without being stable; it is invisible in itself...a phantom which does not remain but cannot get away either...³.

For Plotinus, matter is complete not-being. It lacks any real being. That is why he refers to it as a ghostly image and, at another place, as a fleeting frivolity. Since it is not real at all, it can only be at the lowest level of existence. The negative portrayal of matter means that any association with matter leads to negative results. Consequently, the soul's attachment to the body will negatively affect its being.

By comparison, the soul is superior to the not-being of matter. Thus, it cannot have its origin in matter. It has to originate from elsewhere. This place has to be higher than the soul. Plotinus offers arguments for this higher place. He argues that matter can only be shaped by the soul if something brings about this ability. He also points out that the soul can change when involved with matter only if it is rooted in something prior to it,

which is unchanging. Hence, Plotinus shows that because of the nature of matter, the nature of soul and their relationship to each other, there has to be a higher realm.

In order to see what the higher realm is, Plotinus focuses on the soul's ability. The soul not only has the ability to change and shape matter, but it can also understand intelligible Forms. The body is capable of sensation. However, the soul alone can understand the intelligible Forms of objects. Here, Plotinus clearly follows Plato's doctrine of Forms:

But how are we related to the Intellect? I mean by "Intellect" not that state of the soul, which is one of the things which derive from Intellect, but Intellect itself. We possess this too, as something that transcends us. We have it...common because it is without parts and one and everywhere the same, particular to ourselves because each has the whole of it in the primary part of the soul ⁴.

Using his argument on Intellect, Plotinus shows how he accepts Plato's arguments on the Forms. Since the sensory realm is defective, it can only show examples of the universal perfect Forms. The Forms, alternatively, need to exist in a higher realm where the perfect counterparts of these examples can express their perfections. Thus, the state of the soul, as the above quotation shows, needs Intellect itself, which is transcended in the higher realm. This is how Plotinus shows that the abilities of the soul indicate a higher realm and this higher realm has to be the Intelligible realm.

The description of the intelligible realm in Plotinus' philosophy leads to certain consequences. The Intelligible realm cannot include any other act but intellection itself. It can only think itself and by itself. If it had any other objects, it would not be singular. Thus, the Intelligible realm exists beyond change or decay in its perfect reality. Yet, it does have two characteristics. Thought and object are distinguished in it and Forms appear in multiplicity. This means that the two characteristics allow for divisions within

the realm. Unfortunately, divisions signal lack of total perfection because total perfection can only exist in harmonious unity.

In search for a harmonious unity, Plotinus breaks away from Plato's vision of reality beyond the world of Ideas. Plotinus looks for a higher realm above the Intelligible realm. The source of the Intelligible realm where complete unity is found he calls "The One".

If, then, it is life and outgoing and holds all things distinctly and not in vague general way...it [the intellect] must itself derive from something else, which is no more in the way of outgoing, but it is the origin of outgoing, and the origin of life and the origin of intellect and all things...And in each and every thing there is some one to which you will trace it back, and this in every case to the one before it, which is not simply one, until we come to the simply one; but this cannot be traced back to something else ⁵.

The One is not a positive term for Plotinus. It does not signify a number since it is the origin of number. It does not indicate essence since essence shows limitation. It does not point to existence since existence is positive expression, which can have a negative opposition. The One is simply that which has no origin because it is the origin itself. The One is the origin of all multiplicities and divisions. Yet, the One is not nothing. Nothing is a positive term again signifying the opposite of something. The One is not the opposite of something, something that appears in the world as multiplicities and divisions. The One is rather the origin of both something and nothing. It is the unthinkable transcendent source, which can only be approached through negation. And, this transcendent source is responsible for all things.

According to Plotinus, since the One is responsible for all things, it symbolically emanates light out of itself creating the lower realms. It does not lose any light of its own by emanating the light into the lower realms. However, the lower realms only receive a

dimmer form of the light being able to resemble but not become the exact replica of the higher realm. Thus, the Intelligible realm still somewhat resembles the One in its magnificence with an inclusion of multiplicity and division in its system. The material world, though, falls so far away from the source that it remains in complete darkness with its nature of not-being and on the lowest level of existence.

Plotinus argues the soul cannot have its origin in the material world. Matter depends on the soul in its unity and organization. This means that the soul has its origin in the higher realm. The soul on its own is more genuinely existing than when coupled with the body. The body has a negative influence on the soul due to its nature as matter. It corrupts the soul leading to disorganization and multiplicity. Focus on the material world is, therefore, disadvantageous for the soul because it leads it to its corruption.

Using the images of mire and mud, Plotinus explains this point symbolically:

Ugliness is due to the alien matter that encrusts him. If he would be attractive once more, he has to wash himself, get clean again, and make himself what he was before. Thus we would be right in saying that ugliness of soul comes from its mingling with, fusion with, collapse into the bodily and material: the soul is ugly when it is not purely itself. It is the same as with gold that is mixed with earthy particles. If they are worked out, the gold is left and it is beautiful; separated from all that is foreign to it, it is gold with gold alone ⁶.

The task of the soul is, thus, to cleanse itself from the body. It has to turn away from the body and distance itself from it. The hope of the soul becoming its true self depends on this act of distancing.

The distancing of the soul from the body is not the physical kind, of course. Plotinus does not encourage anybody to end his or her life intentionally to escape the prison of the body. The separation is a spiritual kind. Here, Plotinus relies on Plato's point as it appears in Phaedo:

It may be that the rest of mankind are not aware that those who are applying themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death...And the soul reasons best, presumably, when none of these things worries her—neither hearing, nor sight, nor pain, nor any pleasure; when she is, so far as may be, alone and by herself, forgetting all about the body, and when she strives after truth having no more communication with the body nor contact with it than absolutely necessary⁷.

The soul pursuing its own true self, ideally by the practice of philosophy, distances itself from the body. While still alive, the soul has a limited option of cutting all communication with the body as much as possible in order to limit its influence on the soul. Plotinus himself tells the message:

For what can true self-control be except not keeping company with bodily pleasures, but avoiding them as impure and belonging to something impure?...And death is the separation of body and soul; and a man does not fear this if he welcomes the prospect of being alone⁸.

Thus, the soul finding its true self achieves a symbolic death that occurs early in life, long before physical death. The soul needs to return to its true self. It can only return to its true self by turning away from the body and eliminating its influence. This means that, for those who truly wish to become who they are, the moment of death does not occur at the physical event, but at the moment of their transformation.

In order to find its true self, the ethical duty of the soul becomes to cut all ties with the body. Ethical duty, here, simply refers to the soul's responsibilities in order for it to return to the higher realms. This ethical demand is not an easy task. Since the body gains life by the organization and unity of the soul, it is in the body's best interest to be part of the soul's life. This doesn't mean that the body can make intelligent choices. Instead, it means that the body can and usually has a strong influence on the soul in the sensory world. It forces the soul to pay attention to it, often times to the point where the

soul forgets its true identity and completely loses itself in material concerns. The result is that the soul's attention becomes the body and after a while it identifies with it. Here, the soul falsely recognizes itself as a body solely existing in the sensory world of matter.

The soul now symbolically dies away from its true self.

Moreover, the soul that dies falling into the world directs its attention not just to the body, but to the sense objects in the world. The soul's energy is flowing away from its source in multiple directions. Metaphysically, attention is directed toward the least real level of existence where the greatest amount of multiplicity takes place. Having identified with the body, the soul attaches itself to what is available through the body, which happens to be only a shadow of the truly real. The soul, having identified with the body and, through it, with the sensory world, has now lost its true self as much as it is possible to lose that self. The soul has died away from its true self and it has its challenge now to die away from the world to regain its identity.

Not knowing about its true identity, it is the sensory environment where the lost soul considers the concept of death. Having identified with the body, the person becomes frightened at the idea of losing it. Living in a world of change and decay, the lost soul knows that physical death is inevitable. Yet, such soul finds it impossible that anything waits for it beyond the grave as long as the body is the focal point of its existence. The dread of the ever-approaching and unpredictable moment of annihilation cannot be lifted from the lost soul's mind and the soul learns to live in fear throughout its life. Death becomes the prime enemy of the soul.

It is easy to see that, for Plotinus, the solution will not be to despise death or live in spite of its threats, as it is for many other ancient Greek thinkers. Plotinus sees his

solution both on the ethical and metaphysical levels in raising the soul back into its original self. By the soul's ascent back to its true self, the lost soul's vision of itself can be changed and death can be viewed from a completely different perspective. When the soul sees its true self as an independent entity from the body, it ceases to identify with the sensory world. Thus, it is capable of realizing that death is not a moment of annihilation. Physical death is the complete letting go of the body, which corrupts its true being.

The ascent of the soul happens by returning attention to the soul. While being lost to the sensory world, the soul's attention is directed toward the body and, through it, toward the sense objects. Cutting all ties with the body and the sense objects helps to direct attention back to the soul. Sara Rappe writes in her article "Self-knowledge and subjectivity in the Enneads", focusing on the soul's attention turned back on the Intelligible:

[t]he soul attains to identification with intellect through the practice of concentration, but not concentration upon anything external to it, for this attachment to and distraction by the conception of an external, ontologically separate reality, is precisely the habit that obstructs the mind's progression in knowledge ⁹.

In short, the attention is turned inward and not outward. The inward attention invokes another way of seeing in the individual—a way of seeing that was so far ignored:

But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the "inconceivable beauty" which stays within the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before...Let all these things go and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use ¹⁰.

This new way of seeing awakens the soul to its true self. This true self has, of course, its origin in the higher realms. When awakening to this new way of seeing, the soul lifts

itself into the Intelligible realm where it finds its higher self, “the Soul”. The Soul is the intelligible Form of the souls. However, since the Soul and all forms, in fact, the whole Intelligible realm, are the product of The One, lifting itself high enough, the soul can get a glimpse into The One. Directly experiencing the higher levels, the soul becomes what it contemplates. In other words, the new way of seeing is capable of taking the soul into the highest level of existence and reality.

Plotinus is not just theoretical in his approach. He offers practical advice as to the method of ascent. Borrowing from Plato’s Phaedrus, he associates beauty with purity, harmony and truth¹¹. Looking at what is beautiful is an inspiration to look for the source of the beauty. What is beautiful may be material in nature, but it retains the qualities of purity, harmony and truth, which point to its origin in an unchanging and unified realm. Thus, beauty always points to the Intelligible realm. Partly, this is the reason for the purification of the soul from bodily influence. The soul needs to make itself beautiful by shining in its true identity just like the gold in Plotinus’ example needs to shine on its own. Purification of the soul gives it back its power and unity, which makes it beautiful. The point is that the practical application of beauty both in the inside and the outside leads to the Intelligible realm and possibly through it to The One.

The appreciation of beauty can help the person to distinguish between the lower and higher realms and guide the person to higher ones. The lover of beauty, therefore, achieves his or her end. Arguing still on the basis of Plato’s Phaedrus, Plotinus emphasizes the importance of love¹². The power of love moves the person in the right direction. This is why it is important to be a lover. In Plotinus’ world, just as it is in

Plato's, the true lovers are the lovers of knowledge. In other words, the true lovers are the philosophers.

Philosophers are natural candidates for becoming their true selves since they are already on a path to find knowledge and the source of beauty. Plotinus encourages philosophers to study mathematics and dialectics to reach beyond the sensory world. Eventually, though, they need to experience the higher levels directly. No amount of abstract knowledge can convince them of the higher realms. Solely, direct experience can provide the certainty of this truth. And, this truth is needed to eliminate death as the prime enemy of the soul.

Basically, becoming the true self by finding the source in higher realms offers ultimate freedom for the soul. Finding its center and unity, the soul becomes independent of matter. Because the soul is no longer determined by outside forces, it is possible for it to choose itself based on its true identity. Its newly-found wisdom leads it in its freedom to chose. Of course, a freedom led by wisdom is not associated with activity. The higher the realm the more unity and unchanging principles are found. This means that the more freedom the soul gains, the more it expresses the unity and the unchanging principles of those realms. In other words, freedom is found in peace and rest in truth.

Freedom of the soul changes the soul's perspective on death. Previously, the soul identified with the body fearing its loss. Now, the soul identifies with its true self and does not have to be afraid of losing the body. Symbolically, it has already lost its body by cutting all spiritual ties with it. Previously, the soul feared the ever-approaching and unpredictable moment of annihilation in the world of decay. Now, the soul looks forward to the final step of eliminating the body, which only has a negative effect on it.

Unpredictable as it is, the moment of physical death no longer threatens the soul. And, as for the world of decay, the soul knows that such a world is the lowest level of existence. Its loss need not be mourned. Previously, the soul could not lift its mind from the fear of death. Now, it welcomes the final step to absolute liberation. Previously, death was the prime enemy. Now, the soul can courageously drink the hemlock, as Socrates did, if need be, not having to experience any fear or sorrow.

In case someone gets the temptation to take a short-cut and drink that hemlock, it is wise to note that suicide is condemned by Plotinus. As was already mentioned, Plotinus encourages a spiritually understood death and not a physical one. He actually had a chance to demonstrate it in his lifetime. When his friend, Porphyry, contemplates his suicide, Plotinus steps in to stop him. This is how Porphyry describes the event:

He once noticed that I, Porphyry, was thinking of removing myself from this life. He came unexpectedly while I was indoors and in my house and told me that this lust for death did not come from a settled rational decision but from a bilious indisposition, and urged me to go away for a holiday. I obeyed him and went to Sicily...¹³.

Plotinus describes suicide as a lust because suicide offers no freedom for the soul. Being chained to the sensory world cannot be ended by suicide. The problem is not necessarily being part of this world but, instead, being lost in and to this world. It is the mental attitude of attachment to the world that causes the loss of the soul's true self and not just its simple physical imprisonment. Plotinus makes this point in his argument against the Gnostics who support the idea of the hatred of the body:

But perhaps they [the Gnostics] will assert that those arguments of theirs make men fly from the body since they hate it from a distance, but ours hold the soul down to it. This would be like two people living in the same fine house, one of whom reviles the structure and the builder, but stays there non the less, while the other does not revile, but says the builder has built it with the utmost skill, and waits for the time to come in which he

will go away, when he will not need a house any longer... While we have bodies we must stay in our houses... ¹⁴.

Plotinus calls the body a “fine house”. He clearly does not despise it. He defends both the structure and the builder of the body. The body and the matter it is made of are not evil in themselves. He never calls matter itself evil, he emphasizes that it is only the source of evil. What is evil is the preoccupation with matter and the body.

It is the soul’s duty to recover its true self before the final ties are cut. Existence beyond physical death can only be enjoyed if preparation has been completed and liberation has been achieved. Leaving without its freedom, the soul can only experience misery. Thus, evil is always identified with the attitude of the soul and not with the material substance of the body or the world. If someone is having suicidal thoughts, it is wise to take a vacation, perhaps to Sicily?!

The new worldview of those who have died from this world to regain their true identity is now clear. Yet, the worldview presented so far belongs to the soul who has returned from the higher realm to continue its life in the physical realm. While ascending to The One, though, the soul in contemplation becomes what it contemplates for the duration of the experience. The worldview from the viewpoint of The One markedly differs from that held by the soul who has already returned from it. Plotinus achieves this state only four times in his life.

During the experience the ascended soul adopts the qualities of the realm it contemplates. By the time it reaches The One, the soul becomes the perfect unity and simplicity of The One. Plotinus describes this mystical experience:

He ceases to be himself, retains nothing of himself. Absorbed in the beyond he is one with it, like a center coincident with another center.

While the centers coincide, they are one...[the soul] has no disturbance, no anger, emotion, desire, reason or thought...¹⁵.

The complete simplicity and unity of The One result in the soul ceasing to be a self. Like centers coinciding, the soul and The One become the same under the umbrella of the One. Under such a condition, the physical death of the previously identifiable and separately existing soul is not even meaningful. Death is meaningful while it belongs to someone. Death needs a subject. Without a subject, however, there is no self to die. There is no self to die because there is no self. In The One, an unchanging and everlasting principle rests harmoniously and peacefully. Death is a change. In the absence of change, there is no death possible. This is the ultimate vision of death from the point of view of The One.

Since the universal Form of the soul exists beyond change and decay, the higher self of the soul, the Soul, already exists beyond the possibility of death. Even in the Intelligible realm, the universal Forms rest in eternally existing unchanging principles. The Form Soul ensures that the higher self of the lost soul is already beyond death. In an unchanging and eternal environment, death, which requires a change, is not possible. It is the active lower soul which brings change and, through change, time into effect. Ascending into the higher realm simply reunites the soul itself with its higher self in eternity:

Now if in our thought we were to make this power turn back again, and put a stop to this life which it now has without stop and never-ending, because it is the activity of an always existing soul, whose activity is not directed to itself or in itself, but lies in making and production—if, then we were to suppose that it was no longer active, but stopped this activity, and that this part of the soul turned back to the intelligible world and to eternity, and rested quietly there, what would there still be except eternity?¹⁶

Ascending to the higher realm returns the soul to eternity. Yet, even while the soul is in the lower realm of the sensory world, the higher self, the Soul, is safely present in eternity. It is the ignorance of the lower self, which deceives it into believing in decay. It is the false appearance of the decaying world which leads the soul astray. Nevertheless, the real underneath the appearance is waiting to be uncovered by the soul which is ready to become its true self. Thus, death belongs to a false understanding and death as annihilation is, in reality, a metaphysical impossibility according to Plotinus.

Rising to the One and reaching an ultimate understanding of death is the supreme experience. Plotinus's own account of the mystical experience is inspiring and breathtaking. He writes:

It has happened often. Roused into myself from my body—outside everything else and inside myself—my gaze has met a beauty wonderful and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine ¹⁷.

His breathtaking presentation of the supreme human experience is all the more puzzling when he turns to the moment of return and questions the return itself. He says, “[b]ut there comes the descent, down from intellection to the discourse of reason. And it leaves me puzzled. Why the descent?” ¹⁸ The puzzled Plotinus realizes that the descent back to the sensory world is necessary since not all ties have been cut with this world. The presence of the body requires the person to return to the body and attend to its needs. The body's needs are both intellectual and physical. The soul needs to use reason and dialectic in the presence of the body, as well as to attend to its care and well-being. In short, the ascent into The One can only be temporary while the soul still possesses the body.

Essentially, all liberated souls descend to the sensory world again. The memory of the union with The One, however, permanently changes their lives. Having already died to the world in a spiritual sense leaves the soul unafraid of death. Physical death is the blessing to come at the end of physical life. Meanwhile, attention is always fixed on the higher realms ready to be lifted up again. A continuous attention on the higher realm is associated with the proper virtues in Plotinus' vision. The proper virtues originate from the higher realm of the Intelligible world. Virtues originating from the Intelligible world are always preferred to virtues which are only the replicas in this world; higher virtues come before civic virtues. Thus, the higher virtues help the soul to fix its gaze on the higher realms. It keeps the individual in the right state of mind.

Yet, the work of keeping the soul in the right state of mind no longer requires a lot of effort. Sensory experience seems unreal and inferior in comparison with the mystical experience. This sense of unreality and inferiority itself inspires the person to lift his or her soul up to the realm of true reality again and again to feel him or herself at home. It is having to return to the sensory world that is painful. Ascending to the higher realms, as much work as it requires, seems the natural path to take every time.

It seems that the soul's journey has come to a finish. Once the soul chooses to ascend, its destiny is sealed. It distances itself from the matter and turns inward to find its true self. Having found its true self, it ascends to the Intelligible realm and, then, to the One. It acquires a true vision of its being and the unreality of death. Descending back to the sensory world it has a new way of relating to this world and to death. The soul is now continuously tending toward the higher realms.

Still, the question of what happens to those who fail to become their true selves remain. Plotinus himself claims that only a few people achieve this new way of seeing that the ascending soul develops. This leaves the rest of the souls' fate a question. Yet, indirectly, Plotinus seems to have laid the foundation to answer this question. The higher soul, the Soul, always remains outside of time and sensory reality. It is there for the souls when they return to their true selves. Since annihilation is a metaphysical impossibility in Plotinus' system and the unchanging Soul is eternally present, the souls need to stay in the never-ending change until they choose to ascend. And, since physical bodies fall apart long before most souls are ready to ascend, the only choice left for these souls is to transmigrate into another body when the previous one is dropped.

Transmigration of the soul makes sense in Plotinus' system since annihilation is not a possibility and liberation is not achieved at the end of every life. The soul needs to be in a body again in order to return to the work of liberating itself. It is not possible to liberate oneself from the influence of the body and the material objects in the absence of them. Liberation needs to happen in sensory reality and, most of the time, more than one chance, or lifetime, is needed. Plotinus explains transmigration in his work comparing it to a performance on a stage and claiming that this is not a terrible event:

If, then, death is changing of body, like changing of clothes on stage, or, for some of us, a putting off of body, like in theater the final exit, in that performance, of an actor who will on a later occasion come in again to play, what would there be that is terrible in a change of this kind, of living beings into each other? ¹⁹

Transmigration is necessary and, yet, not a terrible event since it only represents a change for a person and not the end of the person's existence. Having identified with the body is, at this point, what makes the journey so difficult. The ignorant soul fears death and

dreads the moment of its arrival. In reality, though, physical death represents a change only. It is a continuation of existence, picking up the ethical task where one has left off in previous existence. It is the repeated entering of a stage until the final curtain falls.

In fact, Plotinus finds transmigration of the ignorant soul somewhat comical. He lessens the seriousness of the ignorant soul's situation in his writings in order to emphasize what is truly important. For example, at one point, he uses the illustration of war to demonstrate its lack of seriousness:

And when men, mortals as they are, direct their weapons against each other, fighting in orderly ranks, doing what they do in sport in their war-dances, their battles show that all human concerns are children's games, and tell us that deaths are nothing terrible, and that those who die in wars and battles anticipate only little death which comes in old age—they go away and come back quicker²⁰.

The comical portrayal of war is trying to show the lack of seriousness and importance of human affairs. This trivialization heightens the importance of the transformation of the soul. Just as a child's game does not seem a serious affair to adults, human affairs do not seem serious from the viewpoint of those ascended to the higher realms. The comparison highlights the comical part of life as opposed to the truly important part. Physical death and transmigration by themselves are not terrible. It is the failure to ascend and become one's true self that is problematic.

If being descended is problematic to such an extent, one might wonder, after all the discussion, the reason for the descent into the world of death in the first place. The Soul, resting in its unchanging eternity, seems to have no reason to enter a timeframe of activity and repeated deaths. There are two valid answers. The first answer is that the nature of matter necessitates the descent. Following Aristotle this time, Plotinus argues that matter is necessary for the Forms to imprint their image on it. Without matter the

Forms could not express themselves. Matter is necessary for the Forms. The Soul is a Form in need of matter to imprint examples of itself. This is the manner in which the multiplicity of souls is possible. With all the difficulties of its qualities, matter is indirectly good, for it allows the Forms to create a material world and the multiplicity of the souls to exist in that world. Descent is, thus, both necessary and indirectly good.

The second answer has to do with the act of descent itself. Souls in their desire for independent activity fall away from the unchanging eternity of Forms and create time with their activity descending into it. Falling into time, the active soul falls away from the Intelligible realm. Symbolically, it loses its wings of eternity and falls wingless into matter:

But we must get to grips with the question, what is the cause for what we call weakness in the soul...If it is not in those without matter—they are all pure, and, as Plato says, “winged and perfect”, and their activity unhindered—it remains that the weakness must be in the souls which have fallen, those who are not pure and have not been purified; and their weakness will not be a taking away of something but the presence of something alien, like the presence of phlegm or bile in the body²¹.

Leaving behind the wings and the perfection is, unmistakably, an image borrowed from Plato's Phaedrus as Plotinus himself acknowledges it²². He is relying on perhaps Plato's most famous myth. According to the myth, the soul is a winged charioteer driving winged horses who travels through the heavens, losing its wings and falling into an embodied existence. Before falling, it catches a glimpse of true Being. After many transmigration experiences, led by the image of true Being, the soul regains its wings and returns to its heavenly home. Following Plato's myth, Plotinus reshapes the story, giving a philosophical foundation to it. Offering the explanation of desire to engage in activity,

he places the soul into time allowing for both transmigration and for the possibility of ascent out of time back to eternity.

Therefore, the reason for the original descent to the material world has two answers. The difference, though, between the two answers, is the point of view. While the first answer is approached from the point of view of the Forms in the Intelligible realm, the second is approached for the point of view of the souls. The first answer relies on the natures of the Intelligible realm and matter and on their relationships. The second answer focuses on soul's the relationship to both the Intelligible and the Material realms. In Plotinus' system all parts need to fit. The explanation of the original descent is no exception.

Physical death and the repetition of it eventually become necessary and indirectly good. It is needed to explain the reason for and the condition of existing in sensory reality. As with all issues in his philosophy, death becomes a continual attempt to recapture an evolutionary cycle from The One down to the Sensory World and up again back to The One. It is an ever-continuous cycle where all the parts fit the system. The person needs to die physically or spiritually in order to fall back into the lowest level of existence or to move up to a higher level.

Yet, whatever issues Plotinus presents in his philosophical system, one thing remains constant throughout his philosophy: he bases his philosophy on lived experience. His philosophy is not a sheer speculation. Emile Brehier reinforces this point in his book, Philosophy of Plotinus:

We must not take it to be a philosophical speculation. It was felt as a definite experience, ineffable, and impossible to reproduce at [the power of] will ²³.

Plotinus incorporates into his theory his interpretation of all his mystical experiences and the result of them. He actually presents the philosophy he personally believes in and lives. This is why he has a seemingly bizarre character. He sleeps little in order to maintain his state of mind on higher virtues and, through them, on the higher realms. He eats little and does not pamper his body because he has completed his death spiritually and cut his ties with the sensory world. He is running away only in a sense of breaking away from the prison of the sensory world. And, the melancholic syndrome is only an appearance of suffering from a continuous descent into what is unreal and what is the cause of all suffering. Pierre Hadot, cited on the first page, may argue that he seems bizarre, but any enlightened person may seem bizarre from a point of view of a fallen soul.

As Plotinus approaches the end of his life, his tone and attitude change. Suffering from the great deal of physical pain, he includes the notion of fate into his philosophy:

We might say that the soul collects itself in sort of place of its own away from the body, and is whole unaffected by it, and only makes itself aware of pleasures when it has to, using them as remedies and reliefs to prevent its activity being impeded; it gets rid of pains if it cannot, bears them quietly and makes them less by not suffering with the body. It gets rid of passion as completely as possible, altogether if it can, but if it cannot, at least it does not share its emotional excitement...”²⁴.

Unable to eliminate his pain, Plotinus admits that breaking away from the sensory world can be challenging. He simply has to bear his fate of suffering from his illness. Yet, fate is not a strange concept in Plotinus' philosophy. Since The One is perfect, the realms emanating from it evolve into the best possible worlds. The Stoic influence on him makes him accept the notion of fate in evolution, including his own personal fate of

having to endure the pain of his illness. After all, the fate of the souls has always been part of The One's expression of its perfection.

Despite his suffering near the end of his life and the change in his tone and attitude, Plotinus, basically, remains faithful to his philosophy. He lives his philosophy literally to the final moment. As Porphyry reports, on his deathbed, Plotinus turns to his friend to advise him on his philosophical duty. He tells him to “[t]ry to bring back the god in you to the divine in the All.”²⁵ Even in his last moments, Plotinus' attention is on the divine. His concern is for a person to live and, in living, to become god itself. His life ends on a positive note. Instead of avoiding evil, what is necessary is to become the divine itself. Only then can death truly be defeated.

In his final philosophical work, Plotinus examines the question of death directly. He asks the question straight forward: “But, if our life, with its mixture of evil, is good, why is not death an evil?”²⁶ His first answer to this question is very Platonic in nature. He asserts that, if there is no life after death, then evil cannot touch what does not exist. If there is a life after death, on the other hand, then, such a life has to be a better one without the evil influences of the body. He continues his answer, however, in a very Plotinian fashion. If the soul is purified, it is life that is evil not death. The purified soul's difficulty is the closeness of the body. If the soul has a chance to finally separate, it is a blessing. If the soul is not purified, it is life after death that is evil and not death itself. The unpurified soul suffers the consequences of being unpurified, which is the consequence of its fallen nature. For the purified, death is a greater good. For the unpurified, death is not a significant event; it is simply a continuation of the same evil with which they are already familiar. “Life is good to those for whom it is a good, not in

so far as it is a union but because by virtue it keeps away evil; and death is a greater good.”²⁷

In a system of his own, Plotinus solves many difficult philosophical questions, including the question on death. On a metaphysical ground, Plotinus manages to build a system of reality into which Plato's Forms can take their proper place. With the addition of the notion of The One, he is capable of explaining the structure and the function of the universe where the human drama of life and death unfolds on the lowest level of existence. On an ethical ground, he can explain the need to distance oneself from the sensory world and the need to find one's true self in the higher realms. On an aesthetical ground, he explains the importance of beauty in the soul's life and its connection to ethics. All in all, he has a breathtaking system based on his master, Plato's, philosophy with a compilation from different Greek sources of his time that influence him.

Death in his system takes several different roles. The enlightened soul, in its quest to find its true self, dies a spiritual death to this world and finds itself in higher realms. While still existing physically in this world, it is forced to descend back to sensory reality time and time again. While ascended, the soul unites with The One, which leads to the conclusion that physical death is real only from the perspective of the ignorant. In the One there is nobody to die. When descending back to sensory reality, the soul lives with the understanding of its true self, knowing that physical death is the final blessing. The enlightened also knows that, for the ignorant, transmigration is waiting beyond the grave. Yet, the human drama of existence has its comical side, which includes the fear of death and human activity on the world of attachment. Death is part of both the drama and the comedy unfolding in the universe.

Using Plato's Allegory of the Cave can sum up Plotinus' philosophy of death.

The story begins with the people who live imprisoned in the sensory world inside the cave. All they see are shadows around them due to the lower self they are applying and the replica of the intelligible world they are looking at. One day, a naturally talented philosopher rises up. On his way out of the cave, he sees the intelligible world that casts the images down below. Once arriving outside of the cave where The One exists, it becomes unified with it, taking part in its glorious and indescribable state. The self realizes that it is unnecessary to be afraid of death because death is nothing but a separation from the dark cave below. The self is happy, but, still attached to this world through his body, it needs to return to the cave. Once below, the self is unhappy about its return and tries to do what it can to prepare itself for a permanent move from the cave. While preparing, the self, now completely changed, tries to share its knowledge with others. Some listen, but most reject him, thinking that he or she is either crazy or a little eccentric. The self is, however, ready to depart, unafraid of death and knowing the true meaning of liberation. The self has already died to the world. Physical separation is only a formality. When physical death arrives, the talented philosopher approaches fearless, knowing that his or her life was the most meaningful life anyone could have ever lived. On his or her deathbed, this philosopher advises all disciples on what they have to do and, perhaps, reminds his friends not to forget to pay his neighbour what he or she owes him.

Is there a life after death? If the road to death requires a lived experience in the fashion of Plotinus then, there can be no objective statements made about it. The only choice one has is to follow in Plotinus' footsteps and find out. Yet, whatever the final answer is to that question, the message inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delhi still

has the final word on the issue: “Know thyself!” Whatever one wants to know, it is necessary to start with the self. Death is not an exception.

Notes:

¹ Pierre Hadot, Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision, M. Chase, trans., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.74, Subsequently abbreviated as P. S. V.

² Hadot, P.S.V. pp. 76-77

³ Plotinus, Enneads (in six volumes), A. H. Armstrong, trans., (London: William Heinemann, 1966), III. 6. 7, p. 241

⁴ Plotinus, I. 1. 8, Armstrong, p. 111

⁵ Plotinus, III. 8. 9-10, Armstrong, p. 393

⁶ Plotinus, I. 6. 5, Armstrong, p. 249

⁷ Plato, The Dialogues of Plato. Erick Segal (intro.). (New York: Bentam Books, 1986), p. 72-72

⁸ Plotinus, I. 6. 6, Armstrong, p. 251

⁹ Sara Rappe, “Self-knowledge and subjectivity in the Enneads.” The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus. L. P. Gerson, ed., (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p. 268

¹⁰ Plotinus, I. 6. 8, Armstrong, pp. 254-256

¹¹ Irwin Edman, ed., The Works of Plato. (New York: The Modern Library, 1928), p. 276

¹² Edman, pp. 277-280

¹³ Plotinus, V. P. 11, Armstrong, p. 37

¹⁴ Plotinus, II. 9. 18, Armstrong, p. 297

¹⁵ E. O’Brien, trans. and comment, The Essential Plotinus: Representative Treatises From the Enneads. (New York: The New American Library, 1964), VI. 9. 10-11, p. 87

¹⁶ Plotinus, III. 7. 12, Armstrong, p. 343

¹⁷ Plotinus, IV. 8. 1, O’Brien, p. 62

¹⁸ Plotinus, IV. 8. 1, O'Brien, p. 62

¹⁹ Plotinus, III. 2. 15, Armstrong, p. 93

²⁰ Plotinus, III. 2. 15, Armstrong, pp. 91-93

²¹ Plotinus, I. 8. 14, Armstrong, p. 311-313

²² Edman, pp. 285-288

²³ E. Brehier, The Philosophy of Plotinus. J. Thomas, trans., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 152

²⁴ Plotinus, I. 2. 5, Armstrong, p.139-141

²⁵ Plotinus, V. P. 2, Armstrong, p. 7

²⁶ Plotinus, I. 7. 3, Armstrong, p. 273

²⁷ Plotinus, I. 7. 3, Armstrong, 273

Chapter 3

Vedanta and Plotinus on Death: A Comparative Analysis

In the brief accounts of Vedanta and Plotinus on the issue of death outlined in the previous two chapters, some striking parallels have surfaced. Although two worlds and many years apart, they have developed obviously different philosophical approaches, some of their basic philosophical assumptions and certain basic issues concerning death are comparable. They both seem to tell the story of a lost society of human spirits who are in need of rescuing from their own weaknesses in order to escape false interpretation of death and to develop a new and more liberated vision of it. Vedanta and Plotinus both start from the same problem of human failure and end with the possibility of triumph over death.

Outlining the problem of human failure starts by an examination of the human self. Both Vedanta and Plotinus agree on this starting point. It would be possible to start a philosophy by examining things outside of the self and derive conclusions of the self through this approach, but the presence of the self and the fact that all examinations and conclusions are done via the human self makes it sensible to start with that self. Starting with the self, both Vedanta and Plotinus agree that people in their everyday attitude are generally ignorant, misled or sinful. The Katha Upanishad refers to them as “childish men” and Plotinus calls them “ugly souls”. These terms are not meant to be overly judgmental but simply a source of awakening from people’s deficient way of existing. Although Vedanta portrays these people in a very demeaning fashion using a negative tone and Plotinus finds their lives and situations comical, basically, both philosophies are meant to point out the human basic failure of not becoming their true selves. Whether it

is through a tragic or comic portrayal of the human condition, the emphasis is on the self and its failure to achieve its highest potential.

It is the naïve worldview of the “childish man” or the “ugly soul” where these philosophers start their examinations. The “childish man” or the “ugly soul” is the naïve person in his or her everyday attitude who believes that perception of the world happens in an innocent mirror-like fashion. Such a person views the outside world in this innocent mirror-like presence as if it were the sole source of reality in which to move and exist. The naïve person is unaware of the power of the mind that is directly connected to the sensory world. This mind is capable of misleading its occupant about the sensory world. The mistaken view of the sensory world as the sole source of reality is the first lesson to be learned in both philosophies.

At the heart of the lesson rests the truth of the power of the human mind. While it seems that the senses are at fault in both Vedanta and Plotinus, the senses are only as effective as their ability to convince the human mind about the force of their reality. Basically, the mind is a powerful tool, which can mislead a person’s naïve attitude if that person does not know how such a mind works. Contact with the sensory world ensures that the mind is filled with the necessary content of that world on a continuous basis. The naïve person is unaware that this continuous process is the one that does not allow him or her to see the bias this view creates. As it was pointed out in the first chapter, Yama’s first instruction of Naciketas consists of revealing that the “childish man” is ignorant and that he is attached to the world. The same way, as was mentioned in the second chapter, Plotinus remarks that the first sin of the soul is to lose its wings of eternity and fall into the sensory realm. Thus, contact with the sensory world and the focus on it is the source

of ignorance in both philosophies as these philosophers are aware of the mind's tendency, in connection to the sensory world, to mislead the naïve or worldly individuals.

This observation is applicable to the theory of death. The worldly individual learns about death by repeated exposure to it and by building a biased view. Harry G. Armstrong, a physician and scientist who spent over five decades observing dying people, describes the child's development of death-conception in his book, The Emerging Death Mystique¹. According to him, children do not have any concept of death until about age three. After that age, children mostly learn about death from their parents. When a child is disciplined using the threat of death such as "I am going to kill you if you break the vase," the child develops the idea that death is a form of extreme punishment.² If a child finds a dead animal and takes it to his or her parents, the parents might scorn the child teaching him or her that the dead animal is nasty and filthy and should never be handled.³ Death of family members and violence in television also educate children about the forms death takes. Essentially, at the everyday level, all fears and attitudes toward death are acquired through observation and learned behaviour.

The repeated exposure to observation and the attitudes and comments of others build the child's concept of death. The child may learn that death is a sort of punishment, or that it is nasty and dirty, or that it is something to be afraid of, or any of the combinations of these concepts and possibly more. Armstrong reveals that

[b]y age ten most children have a fairly good grasp of what death involves, including the fact that it is universal, inevitable and a permanent end to earthly existence...these [experiences] usually form the basis of the individual's attitude toward death for the remainder of his life...⁴.

The point is that the learned behaviour toward death in childhood becomes the basis of the concept of death carried into adulthood.

In general, by the time of adulthood a person has set beliefs about death. Death is thought to be the end of life, which begins at birth. What is behind the veil of death is uncertain because dead people do not talk. Depending on the belief system of the person there is either a theistic or atheistic interpretation of death; there is either an afterlife prescribed based on set religious values or no afterlife due to annihilation. Whatever the developed belief system is, the bias is already there. The more people come into contact with death, the more their expectations about death are strengthened. The mind has properly built and now upholds its biased view of death, often times automatically turning to its bias. The mind's contact with the outside world has done its proper job in misleading the person. The senses have become powerful by their ability to change the attitude of the person through their influence on the human mind.

The description of performed rituals and sacrifices in the Katha Upanishad reflects this attitude of death. Even Nacekitas' preoccupation with the heavenly worlds, evident in his second wish, is a reminder of the bias toward sacrifices and rituals he and the people of his time believed. Sacrifices and rituals performed, at least in part, to gain favourable treatment in this life and in the beyond is a clear bias of this time. People learned to believe in a specific form of afterlife, which required a specific kind of worshipping to attain a specific place in the afterlife. This is the bias they acquired through observation, attitude and comments of others.

Similarly, Plotinus points to the bias developed about death in his time when analyzing the sensory environment where the lost soul considers the concept of death. As was already shown on page 42, the soul, immersed in matter, identifies with the body. Unable to see without the body's influence, the person develops a fear of losing that

body. In other words, he or she develops a fear of death. The fear of death dwells in the person's psyche. The biased concept of death is fully developed at this point. The fear of losing the body to death and a sheer panic about the possibility of this event is what these people learned through observation, attitude and comments of others. Once again, the mind, in contact with sensory reality, has done its expected work.

Having identified the world of the "childish men" or "ugly souls", both Vedanta and Plotinus agree that knowledge for such men or souls is limited. Their knowledge is always directed toward the outside world. In the Katha Upanishad, the childish men's knowledge is always associated with the ideas of perception, inference and reason. In Plotinus' writings, the word that can be used to describe such knowledge is empirical. Whatever way one describes it, the idea is that their knowledge is sensory oriented. The sensory world is present either directly or indirectly in both philosophies.

The solution in both philosophies is to turn away from the source of deception. Turning away from the sensory world means turning inward. Instead of directing attention from the inside to the outside, these philosophies ask that the person direct attention to the inside only. Suspending attention to the outside world halts the usual process of selection, organization and interpretation in which the mind is involved. In the Katha Upanishad, Yama reveals to Naciketas that renunciation of the world and meditation on the self is required to gain wisdom. According to Plotinus, turning away from the sensory world, most importantly from the influences of the body, and contemplating the One is required for freedom of the soul. They lead their audiences to the same path.

However, are meditation and contemplation the same? Defining either meditation or contemplation is difficult. Meditation is, according to G. William Farthing, "...a ritualistic procedure intended to change one's state of consciousness by means of maintained, voluntary shifts in attention."⁵ Claudio Naranjo sees meditation as the essence of doing anything with right attitude⁶. Robert M. Gimello understands meditation as "...disciplined but creative application of the imagination and discursive thought to an often complex religious theme or subject matter."⁷

As opposed to meditation, Naranjo contends that contemplation differs from meditation in that contemplation is associated with a sense of wondering with focusing on ideas.⁸ Robert M. Gimello, on the other hand, sees contemplation as "...although in some respects a development of meditation, in fact [attempting] to transcend the activities of imagination and intellect through an intuitive concentration on some simple object, image or idea."⁹ While the experts may understand differently or even slightly disagree on definitions of meditation and contemplation, it seems that both have the same goal using different techniques. On the one hand, it seems that meditation on the self is intended to eliminate all outside influences, emptying the mind of all alien disturbances in order to find the source of mental processes. On the other hand, contemplation is intended to hold one specific idea in the mind with the exclusion of others in an attempt to discover some truth about it. In short, both seem to put an effort into trying to uncover a deeper understanding and truth about the mind, which is normally overlooked and unavailable to the person.

In applying these concepts to Vedanta and Plotinus, it is not difficult to see that, at least in their case, meditation and contemplation have the same goal. Through deeper

understanding and truth about the mind, they both uncover the so far hidden self, the true identity of the human person. The Katha Upanishad encourages the use of Yoga meditation to find Atman, the true self. In essence, this Yoga meditation includes a focus on controlling the breathing process and a repetition of a mantra to occupy the conscious human mind ¹⁰. In the Katha Upanishad, evidence of this Yoga meditation is found in their use of the mystic syllable “om” ¹¹.

In his contemplation, Plotinus focuses on the One with the exclusion of everything else in an attempt to discover some truth about it. The One becomes the sole object of contemplation. The sensory world and even the intelligible world are set aside in favour of the One. Thus, both philosophies uncover a deeper understanding and truth about the mind by achieving a one-pointedness. This one-pointedness is the goal of all meditations and contemplations. The objective is to completely let go of the influences of the sensory world and inner thoughts in order to suspend the usual functioning of the human mind. This means that in slightly different fashions both Vedanta and Plotinus turn to the source of mental faculties.

By emphasizing the use of meditation or contemplation on the self or on the One, Vedanta and Plotinus seem to dismiss any involvement of traditional rituals or sacrifices. Naciketas is the personification of the growing hostility of his age toward rituals and sacrifices in the Katha Upanishad. Those who use such practices without any mental input are pronounced to be deluded. Plotinus does not talk about rituals and sacrifices. However, there is reference to his opposition to them in his biography. When one of his followers, Amelius of Tuscany, starts taking parts in rituals and asks Plotinus if he would go along, Plotinus declines the offer. According to Porphyry, Plotinus declares that the

gods should come to him instead of him going to the gods ¹². Just like Naciketas and his people, Plotinus is clearly not in favour of any rituals and sacrifices.

Why do these philosophies oppose rituals and sacrifices? After all, they can be used effectively, too. According to Naranjo, symbols can be used as an alternative technique in meditation.¹³ In his opinion, instead of turning away from the outside world and focusing on the source of mental faculties, a person can turn to a symbol as the focus of attention. The repetition of a symbolic word or image can awaken elements of experience for which the word or image stands. This can be an opening up to a so far ignored part of the person. In such a case, symbolic ritual or even sacrifice can achieve the desired end of finding the unknown source in the person.

The real problem here is that symbols die with the passing of time. Symbols lose their meanings. Once the meaning is no longer there, the symbolic ritual or sacrifice becomes a habit people engage in without proper involvement. Because of the threat of dead symbols, many religions and philosophies avoid them. Narajano expresses this sentiment in his book:

Yet most religious and artistic images and philosophical forms have become petrified symbols, mere icons that do not speak anymore. Aware of the propensity of individuals to become attached to dead husks and substitute the word expressing the image for the spirit behind it, some mystical traditions have emphasized forms of meditation that bypass symbols, rituals and ideas ¹⁴.

They try to bypass symbols by using other methods such as the negative approach of letting go of the outside world and of inner disturbances of the mind. Both Vedanta and Plotinus end up with this avoidance technique, choosing the alternative method of the negative approach. Neither of them favours cherishing dead symbols, which no longer have any meanings attached to them.

They both favour turning away from the world, turning inward and finding the source of mental faculties. When these philosophies turn to the source, they find something similar. The Vedanta finds Atman, the self, which exists apart from all descriptions. Sankara describes Atman:

And this Self (of whose existence all are conscious) is
Brahman...Brahman is eternal, all-knowing, absolutely self-sufficient,
ever pure, intelligent and free, pure knowledge, absolute bliss ¹⁵.

In like manner, Plotinus finds the pure soul unaffected by matter or the body. He explains this fact in the following way:

So in spite of everything the soul will be at peace, tuned to itself and resting in itself...The beast is the body which has been given life. But the true man is different, clear of these affections... ¹⁶.

Although Vedanta and Plotinus both describe the source in similar and mostly positive ways, they also agree that Atman or the Soul cannot be properly described using language. Language is designed to deal with the content of everyday experience the “childish man” or the “ugly soul” faces. Language is not designed to deal with the source of the content, available only to those few individuals who undertake the journey these philosophies inspire. Thus, Atman or the Soul are both described as ineffable.

Furthermore, Atman and the Soul, in these philosophies, have a special connection to the source of reality. Yet, this special connection seems to be the major dispute of a metaphysical sort within the Vedanta schools. In the Katha Upanishad and in Sankara’s Vedanta, the source of the person and the source of reality are one and the same, as indicated in the above quote by Sankara. In these works, the world is seen in terms of illusion, and Brahman is seen as the real reality with the purpose of assimilation into Brahman. In Ramanuja’s and Madhva’s philosophy, on the other hand, the source of

reality is simply described as the source of the person's salvation. Ramanuja's Vedanta tolerates a qualified non-dualism and rejects assimilation into Brahman. Madhva outright denies monism and sees human beings in inferior status. Thus, the connection takes on a different meaning based on the metaphysical visions of philosophers into which they place the meaning of this special connection. However, they undeniably defend the existence of such connection and its special meaning in Atman's existence.

Still, some comparison holds between Vedanta and Plotinus in the area of this special connection to the source of reality. Since in Plotinus' thought there is a unity of soul and the One, this unity resembles the interpretation of the Katha Upanishad and the Vedanta's of Sankara with regard to the unity which appears in these works. In the Katha Upanishad and in Sankara's Vedanta, the unity of the self and Brahman is upheld by their assimilation. This means that in the Katha Upanishad, in Sankara's Vedanta and in Plotinus, there is an acknowledgment of identity between the source of the individual and the source of reality. A unity in what exists is mutually recognized.

In these three philosophies, unity is emphasized throughout. The unity of all that exists is always measured against the multiplicity the person is normally faced with in everyday life. The metaphysical position developed out of this emphasis on unity is that of monism. In these philosophies, the world becomes phenomenal in nature underneath which there is a real reality. According to Yama, those who see multiplicity are ignorant and those who know the Atman-Brahman relationship are enlightened as explained by the simile of the water running down on the hill quoted in chapter one on page 8. Sankara agrees with this idea. Plotinus argues, using his metaphor of the gold quoted in the second chapter on page 40, that the soul, when immersed in matter, cannot see its shining

self and the higher realms from which it originates. When the soul is cleansed, on the other hand, it participates in the One, which is the true reality. Thus, all these philosophies embrace a type of monism where reality is one and the everyday world of multiplicity offers a distorted perception of the world.

How can such a shift in attitude be explained? Through meditation and contemplation, there is a disruption of normal mental processes and a discovery of a pure source, a previously unknown element, which leads to a different way of perceiving the world. The enlightened self of the Vedanta and the ascended soul of Plotinus both identify the real reality from the standpoint of the newly discovered state of mind. Psychologists call this state altered state of consciousness.¹⁷ Comparing the normal state to the altered state, the enlightened self or the ascended soul of Vedanta and Plotinus decides that the normal state is the less real.

It is not difficult to see why the altered state of consciousness seems to be more real compared to the normal state. Given the fact that the mind selects, organizes and interprets the world in such a way that it builds a biased picture of the world, the halting of such processes can lead to the elimination of such biases. The discovery of the source of these biases leads to both the ability to eliminate such bias and the understanding of the process that creates the bias. This way, the source, Atman or the Soul, reveals the ultimate nature and function of the inner life of the individual. Realization of the ultimate nature and function helps people to see the world in a more unbiased manner. The deautomatization of the normal process of the waking state of mind opens up a new way of unbiased seeing of the world. Robert E. Orstein, in On the Psychology of Meditation, describes this new way of seeing the world:

In another metaphor meditation is likened to the night: stars cannot be seen during the day, their faint points of light overwhelmed by the brilliance of the sun. In this image, meditation is the process of “turning off” the overwhelming competing activity that is the light of the sun, until, late at night, the stars can be seen quite clearly. To one who is limited in his observation of the stars to the daytime the idea that many faint distinct points of light exist and can be seen is obvious nonsense ¹⁸.

The altered state is not just another speculative philosophical theory. This state is an altogether different way of seeing the world; it is a seeing of stars one has never seen before due to the absence of darkness of the normal state of mind.

Both Vedanta and Plotinus offer a completely new way of looking at the world. It is a discovery of a higher self that belongs to the ultimate reality of the universe. The lower self in both philosophies is the self that is lost to the phenomenal world. The higher self is the one that has the superior vision. The human task consists of becoming this higher self so that one can have the superior vision of the world. In the Katha Upanishad, Sankara’s Vedanta and Plotinus, the transformation into unity with the source of reality achieves this goal. In Ramanuja and Madhva’s philosophy where dualism is maintained on different levels, it is devotion that leads to a different way of looking at Brahman. Ramanuja reaches the goal by the integrated effort of moral purity, knowledge and devotion, while Madhva brings about the result by emphasizing devotion solely, to be achieved after the preparatory phases of moral purity and knowledge are over. In spite of their differences in techniques, they all focus on gaining the superior vision of the world. In Vedanta’s views, the enlightened self has an accurate vision of Brahman and its relationship to the world and in Plotinus’ views, the liberated self has an accurate vision of the One and its relationship to the world.

The accurate vision transforms the individual in allowing to reach his or her highest potential as a human being. The self or the soul learns to gain its greatest distance from sensory reality that is possible without physically dying. Distance from worldly influence of attachments ensures the person of a life which is free from symbolically perceived layers covering the true self which, in turn, exists underneath these layers at the core of existence. Pierre Hadot explains this in his book, Philosophy as a Way of Life, in reference to ancient philosophy:

...[t]hus, all spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The “self” liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our moral person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought ¹⁹.

Enslaved to nothing in the sensory world, the self or the soul exists in its most independent, thus, most powerful manner. Sankara, quoting “Not so, not so!” from the ancient texts, represents the message most accurately of the naked self stripped of all worldly qualities.²⁰ Plotinus also shares this sentiment when describing the liberated soul, following Plato, as “winged and perfect” without the body.²¹ The image of Vedanta and Plotinus, thus, consists of a light and pure self or soul shining in its true glory as a perfected human being.

The perfected human being shining in its true glory is an important part of the self or the soul’s development, not just for the new vision of death he or she develops, but also for his or her existential situation in the world. As was mentioned above, the perfected human being comes closest to dying from this world without the actual physical departure. In the Katha Upanishad, Naciketas visits the god of death, Yama, without physically dying since it is clear right from the beginning that he would return to his

father at the end of his education. His is a symbolic journey into a spiritual death without the physical death. Plotinus, following the message of Plato that philosophy is the practice of dying and death, presents death as a separation of body and soul without encouraging anybody to take his or her life.²² Thus, in both philosophies, the ethical, psychological and philosophical separation from this world causes a spiritually attained death while the person, physically speaking, stays alive. This is the closest anybody can come to live his or her own death in this world and it is the closest it gets to actual death in this world for the living. It is a true practice of dying in the Platonic sense.

A spiritually attained death while being physically alive is an art. It is a direct experience, both philosophies insist. It is not an intellectual exercise done at the desk of a philosopher between lunch and dinner. The perfect human being lives his or her life as a liberated person in possession of transcendental knowledge. As was mentioned before on page 13, when referring to knowledge, the ignorant in the Katha Upanishad is associated with the words “perception”, “inference”, “reason” and in Plotinus’ philosophy with the term “empirical knowledge”. Both see the knowledge of the ignorant individual as less perfect for the purpose of living a liberated life. Transcendental knowledge, on the other hand, becomes the preferred type of knowledge since it directly involves the individual in an intellectual exercise. Hence, spiritually attained death while being alive is an art, which is practiced through direct experience using transcendental knowledge.

Also, beyond the art of living a liberated life, there is a new vision of death. It may be important to live an authentic life as one’s true self but it is only the condition for developing the new vision of death. Living the authentic life in itself is a huge achievement most people never reach, as both Vedanta and Plotinus acknowledge, but

dying spiritually is not the same as rendering death meaningless. The meaninglessness of death arrives as a direct result of having achieved the highest state of consciousness possible and being aware of such realization. Previously, the self or soul was lost to the world of what is referred to as everyday consciousness. In contrast, the liberated self is standing on its own in its own glory using the highest state of consciousness and viewing the issue of death from this new perspective. This new perspective is the one that leads to the conclusion that death is meaningless.

In both philosophies, Brahman and the One exist beyond the multiplicity of the world. It is complete unity where the characteristics of multiplicity do not apply. The ultimate Brahman or the One is the negation of all characteristics. What one is capable of describing is not Brahman or the One. This source of reality in both philosophies stands beyond all and every concept, including existence and non-existence. Looking at death from a point of view rooted in a source beyond existence and non-existence makes death meaningless. If reality is not defined in terms of existence versus non-existence, then, discussion on life versus death makes no sense.

Previously, the ignorant or lower self identified death as the end of life. Life extended from birth to death. Death was mysterious because dead people do not talk. For the ignorant self, there was a belief in afterlife or a belief in annihilation based on tradition and lifestyle. The liberated or higher self, elevated above the sensory world into the reality of beyond existence and non-existence, does not have this vision of the lower self. The higher self does not see itself extending from birth to death. The higher self is beyond all description, including time. Death is not mysterious because death is no longer a natural barrier between existence and non-existence. And, for the liberated self,

reality of the afterlife or annihilation need not be based on faith. The reality of Brahman or the One is viewed with more certainty than the reality of the normal state of consciousness. From the reality of Brahman or the One, regular concerns of the lower self with regard to death are not even a legitimate consideration.

From this point of view, dying as a physical cessation is not as great a concern as dying to the sensory world. While the anxiety of the lower self is focused on the moment of death and everything it has learned and believed about death is tested at the moment of death, the concern from the point of view of the higher self is the fate of those who are lost to the sensory world. When the ignorant self is the driving force, it is unable to break away from the prison of that world. Attachment to the world of multiplicity, or attachment to desires, the person is dying to the world. Unable to break away, the world keeps its true self or soul, symbolically, in a coma from which it cannot awake to the true world and to its true self. Not being able to realize its true self means the person cannot achieve the highest goal of pronouncing death meaningless.

The image of living in a coma can now be compared to the previous description of a spiritually achieved death. Normally, the person living an everyday life would be considered living a true life while all others would be just considered eccentric or less than desirable. However, liberation reverses this process. Living an everyday life becomes less than desirable. In fact, it is comparable to living in a coma from that perspective. True life is the one where the liberated person dies a spiritually achieved death while still in the body and reaches its highest goal. Living a liberated life becomes desirable. Consequently, what is desirable becomes a matter of perspective in this sense.

Yet, one should not forget that those who have been to both sides of life always prefer the liberated side of it. They prefer the liberated side not just for existential consideration, but for the new interpretation of death as meaningless. Vedanta describes the everyday state of mind of the people in this world in a very degrading tone. These people are thought to be “blind,” “childish,” “headless,” “deluded,” and “ignorant,” trapped in the world of constant death. Plotinus describes the soul in a similar fashion. The soul present in this world is the sinner whose first sin is to descend to this world and its second is to struggle in it while more sins are committed. Thus, this world becomes the undesirable place, according to both philosophies. It is the world where the self or the soul gets entangled and weighed down and suffers in such a way that it can be compared to a state of dying. Only those people prefer to call everyday existence the desirable state who have not been to the other side of life, to the liberated state. From the liberated perspective, if the self or the soul wants to come to life again, that self or soul has to raise itself to Brahman or to the One. This higher realm is where, for the liberated self or soul, the normal state of consciousness is found and where that self or soul’s being is rooted in. This altered state of consciousness describes the ultimate freedom. This is where the ultimate freedom from death is achieved having rendered it meaningless. It is where the ultimate goal is reached.

To sum up, the person who aspires to be liberated is facing hard work. He or she needs to turn inward, let go of the influences of the outside world and the mind. Having found the real self, the person can live a more authentic life practicing death in a Platonic sense. However, to go further, the person needs to reach the ultimate reality where a

proper understanding of death can be seen as meaningless. Here the person can be free of death forever.

What happens to those people who are unable to become their true and free higher self? Both philosophies agree that those individuals need to remain in the sensory world. As the quote from the Katha Upanishad shows on page 14, Vedanta declares that ignorant selves are going from death to death. They need to be reborn in this world due to their ignorance. Similarly, as Plotinus describes on page 52, the destiny of the descended soul is to exist on a symbolic stage in a theater as one person and to enter in a new dress as another person. Reincarnation in both philosophies is the vehicle of returning to the sensory world. In the Katha Upanishad, the ignorant self enters the heavens, rests for a while and is fitted with a body based on its accumulated karma. Plotinus also describes a trip to the beyond. In his philosophy, the soul enters Hades and waits for a rebirth carrying its evil deeds with it to continue its descended existence. Thus, reentering the sensory world is an unavoidable part of the existence of the ignorant self or soul.

It is easy to argue that rebirth into the sensory world shows up as a coincidence in both theories. Hindus have a long tradition of believing in transmigration of the soul and the Greeks also believed in being born again. The two traditions might have even influenced each other when crossing paths. Historically, this might be the case, but philosophically speaking there is an added element to it. It simply makes sense to argue for a return to this world. If unity is truth and multiplicity is false, then, those who do not achieve unity need to remain in multiplicity. Multiplicity exists only in the sensory world, which means that those attached to it can only continue their existence in such a condition. If the unity has not been achieved within the self or the soul, a subject-object

split in the person's state of mind remains. Such a person needs to retain this split, unable to exit in any other way. Thus, the person needs to come back to this world until he or she is enlightened or ascended beyond the dualities of mind. Only the proper state of mind can free the person from the world.

Even in Ramanuja and Madhva, where duality between the individual and Brahman is retained on a level, the proper knowledge and relationship with Brahman are needed in order to be freed from this world. For Ramanuja, as was explained in the first chapter on page 24, the individual is responsible for his or her future since preliminary exercises and devout meditation is a personal duty. Of course, it is still up to Brahman to offer the grace of salvation to the person, but individual responsibility is emphasized throughout. Without Brahman's grace, the person needs to transmigrate to this world again.

For Madhva, Brahman is the sole source of salvation. This means that the person may be powerless to liberate himself or herself, but, still, the person has responsibility to prepare for and engage in complete devotion to Brahman. It is still up to the person to put himself or herself into a situation where Brahman is willing to offer its grace of salvation. If failing to gain the grace, according to both these philosophers, the person needs to return to try again. Thus, the ignorant always returns until salvation. This means that in all these schools of Vedanta and in the view of Plotinus, return to this sensory world remains inevitable.

Hence, both Vedanta and Plotinus transfer the separation from the sensory world from the moment of death to the moment of liberation or ascent. At the moment of death, what is decided is whether the person returns to this world as a lower self, or continues on

as a higher self, discarding its body for the very last time. The crucial moment becomes the moment of liberation or ascent when the person's fate is decided. Once separation from the sensory world has been achieved by liberation or ascent, physical death is not an issue for the higher self anymore. It is certain that such a person is changed and perceives death from a higher standpoint than the ignorant self or the descended soul. The important moment is clearly the liberation or the ascent where sensory existence gains new meaning.

For those living an everyday life to whom liberation is an alien concept, it is not clear how the liberated person exists in general and, between the moment of liberation and death in particular. Since liberation is a direct experience, no amount of mental exercise such as philosophical or scientific speculation can offer an insight into what these people experience. Theirs is the rare authentic living they are unable to share with the rest of the world. Even when they try to write about it and express it using language, they often insist that the real experience is ineffable and it is something that is needed to be lived and experienced instead of being talked about. This means that their authentic lifestyle and true vision of death is forever sealed from the rest of humanity. It is sealed unless one accepts the invitation to this world and becomes part of it.

Consequently, the new vision of death Vedanta and Plotinus present is an alternative vision even if the majority of the non-liberated selves or souls are alien to it. Many worldly-oriented individuals might have difficulty accepting the validity of such vision due to lack of experience and insight into the world of the liberated. Still, it is not the number of people experiencing this vision that makes it acceptable. After all, the metaphysical structure of the universe and the existential situation of a person are not a

matter of majority vote. A vision becomes acceptable when it adds to the quality, well-being and freedom of the human individual and when it adds to this individual's knowledge and sense of reality something greater and more refined. This is the vision of death that Vedanta and Plotinus offer to the world and this is why it is to be accepted as a valuable alternative to other visions.

The significance of the new vision of Vedanta and Plotinus now becomes clear. Vedanta and Plotinus discover a state within the human being, which is universally available to all and potentially present in everyone. The discovery offers people a new authentic lifestyle and, beyond that, a new perspective on death. Their theories give hope for a better existence in the beyond, which can be reached during the person's lifetime. If this existence is not reached in this lifetime for some reason, there is an opportunity to reach it in another life. They defeat both annihilation and blind faith in the afterlife and replace it with an experience of reality, which they sense as more real than that of the everyday person's. They may present their visions in a slightly different manner due to the time and culture in which they live, but both theories similarly inspire people to personally engage in and adopt a new way of looking at the world and through that a new way of looking at both life and death.

Those who take the invitation to become enlightened or to ascend to the true realm truly dismiss death. Death for them is not conquered since there is nothing to conquer. Death is just a simple "letting go" of a meaningless concept that pronounces its empty threats on the human being. There is just joy left knowing that there is a better way of seeing and a better way of being in the world.

Those who refuse the invitation, remain outsiders. Many may reject the new lifestyle and vision since it is alien to them. Still, some are willing show admiration for the courage of these people to be different in both their approach to life and death. This admiration is needed in the twenty-first century where so many experience a void throughout their lives with the void getting darker and deeper toward the end. With the mysterious end waiting in every person's life, if not acceptance, at least, admiration for the mysterious, ineffable and transcendent is necessary to have hope for a discovery of a new dimension of both the universe and human experience.

Notes:

¹ H. G. Armstrong, The Emerging Death Mystique. (New York: Exposition Press, 1978), p. 54

² Armstrong, p. 54

³ Armstrong, p. 55

⁴ Armstrong, p.56

⁵ William Farthing, The Psychology of Consciousness. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 421

⁶ C. Naranjo, and R. E. Ornstein, On the Psychology of Mediation. (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 5

⁷ R. M. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation" in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, S. T. Katz, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 113

⁸ Naranjo, p. 7

⁹ Gimello, p. 113

¹⁰ Naranjo, pp. 149-150

¹¹ R. E. Hume, trans., The Thirteen Principal Upanishads, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 352

¹² Plotinus, Enneads (in six volumes), A. H. Armstrong, trans., (London: William Heinemann, 1966), V. P. 10, p. 35

¹³ Naranjo, p. 15

¹⁴ Naranjo, p. 73

¹⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, and C. A. Moore, ed., A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 511-512, Subsequently abbreviated as SIP

¹⁶ Plotinus, I. 1. 9-10, pp. 113-115

¹⁷ Farthing, p. 202

¹⁸ Naranjo, p. 214

¹⁹ Pierre Hadot, Philosophy As a Way of Life, M. Chase, trans., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 103

²⁰ SIP, p. 538

²¹ Plotinus, I. 8. 14, p. 313

²² Plotinus, I. 6. 6, p. 251

Conclusion

The close examinations of Vedanta and Plotinus lead to new insights on a philosophical understanding of these ancient theories of death. This exposition has given an account of the original standpoints of these ancient systems on the phenomenon of death and has revealed the comparable aspects of these classical contemplations on death and its existential implications.

Using the fine work of the Katha Upanishad, the Vedanta's philosophy of death starts taking shape. The exposition of death begins by focusing on the concept of illusoriness of the world. Vedanta describes a life of ignorance and attachment to desires as the reasons for the forgetfulness of death and its true meaning. Attachment to desire imprisons people in the world of multiplicity whereas, in reality, there is only unity of Brahman. The imprisoned ignorant individual cannot break away from the phenomenal world resulting in a sentence of having to be born again and again.

According to Vedanta, if a person wishes to shake off the chains of imprisonment, ignorance needs to be left behind. Liberation is possible by detachment from the world of multiplicity. The person needs a change in the center of mental activity. Mental attention is turned from the outside to the inside. Turning inside results in the discovery of the Atman-Brahman relationship, which is the source of liberation. Such liberation does not take place through any regular channels of knowledge. This is a direct experience the person has to pursue.

Liberation brings a different perspective on the life-death relationship. Total knowledge eliminates all concerns about death. Death loses its meaning, as it no longer represents the natural human barrier. The moment of liberation is the barrier the liberated

person has already passed through. Freedom is achieved and the fear of death is eliminated.

Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva expand on the theory. Depending on the metaphysical position they take, they shape the theory by the different details they add to it. Sankara identifies liberation with the higher self. He argues assimilation into Brahman based on his non-dualistic approach. Ramanuja modifies the theory by introducing his qualified non-dualism. Liberation is now, in part, dependent on Brahman and there is no assimilation possible. The dualism of Madhva further shapes the theory. The inferior human individual can only hope for liberation through absolute devotion to Vishnu. Thus, death still loses its conservatively understood meaning through liberation in all three philosophies even though the fate of an individual outside of transmigration differs from one commentator to the other.

Plotinus also starts with outlining the human condition. According to him, the original problem is the descent into matter. Matter forces the soul to pay attention to the body and to the outside world. The ignorant soul pays attention to the wrong part of the soul-body dualism due to involvement with the senses. The senses imprison the person to the joy the body can provide. The soul is lost to the world where it identifies completely with the body. It is overcome with fear at the thought of losing that body. Death becomes evil and the natural human way of relating to death is born.

If the person wants to change his or her situation and develop a different view of death, ascent to the One is the only solution. To return to the One, the person has to identify with the higher self in the higher realms. The soul needs to turn away from the body and the outside world to eliminate all unnecessary additions to it. Then, it can

become the higher self. Becoming the higher self takes hard work and personal involvement.

This is a new vision of life and death that does not resemble any other type of knowledge. It is a direct experience of a higher realm that is not available in a normal condition. It is a process of complete purification. Even consciousness is purified from its dualistic tendencies. The goal is complete unity in order to share in the One. Once the person experiences ascent, the vision of death changes. Sensory experience seems both unreal and inferior to the experience of the One. The soul realizes that it belongs to a higher order. Not identifying itself with the body, the soul regains its sense of freedom.

The ascended soul does not need to return to the world after death. Those who are still in descent, however, have no choice but to return. Transmigration of the soul is inevitable until the soul identifies with sensory reality. Plotinus finds this, though, a comical event. It is like a theatrical production where a soul enters the stage as different characters; it is not to be taken too seriously. What is to be taken seriously is the work involving the soul's ascent in order for it to escape the burden of transmigration. The defeat of death is the only serious work in life.

The two philosophies of death are comparable in many ways. Their central focus is the attitude of the human mind. Ignorance is tied to a vision according to which the mind acts in a mirror-like fashion. It turns its attention to the outside world and to the body and reports back to the person what is there. This is the process leading to ignorance. Preoccupation with the outside world takes away from the possibility of an introspection that reveals the true workings of the human mind to the person involved. Death is known, according to such ignorant vision, by observation taking place in the

sensory world. Observation teaches that death is to be feared, that death is the end of life, that death is evil and that death means either annihilation or eternity. The ignorant person keeps insisting on such a biased view offered by the sensory world.

To become wise, the person has to turn inward to experience the root of mind or soul. The source dwells in a higher realm outside of the sensory world. Identifying with this source is the summit of all knowledge. The identification results in disruption of normal worldly attitude. This is a higher mental state impossible to describe using normal channels of knowledge. It is a state where all biases and doubts perish by the identification of such a source.

Death loses its meaning from a higher perspective. Knowledge of death is no longer acquired through sensory knowledge of any kind. Death is known from the inner source, which is more real and is separated from the less real phenomenal world. According to this source, death is not a barrier of any kind. The barrier dissolves in the moment of liberation, which ensures the meaninglessness of death. If the source is the real, which is beyond all concepts including existence and non-existence, then death loses its previous meanings. Only ignorant people find that death has some meanings because they are still attached to the sensory world. Therefore, dying to the sensory world while alive is what needs to be done; all else is a side issue.

Differences may exist in the two theories due to culturally-shaped ideas and the use of language. The main message is the same, though. Vedantian-Plotinian standpoint forces philosophers to return to a more experiential way of approaching death. This is a new vision that needs personal involvement. This personal involvement allows for an authentic lifestyle where death can be experienced in ways it had never before. The

person dies a symbolic spiritual death and learns to practice death in a Platonic sense.

Beyond this authentic lifestyle, there is a new vision of death emerges, which is capable of dismissing death forever. Death becomes a meaningless concept with an empty threat for the liberated person.

On final analysis, examining death from an experiential and existential point of view, both Vedanta and Plotinus suggest, is a courageous undertaking. It is courageous in an environment which is increasingly sensory-oriented. With sensory orientation comes an emphasis on the study of those subjects, which lend themselves to methods tied to the sensory world. Death is not a subject that fits this description. It is often deemed to be a side issue and as a result is tossed aside. Death is simply dealt with as a biological breakdown of the body. Anything else is pronounced to be mere speculation.

If a person, against all the odds, is still courageous enough to undertake the journey, that person has to endure great hardship from those unwilling to even consider the legitimacy of this journey. Often ridiculed and labeled, the person has difficulty finding an audience for a remarkable discovery of the human mind and the message imbedded in it about the meaninglessness of death. Very few would ever listen to, let alone accept, the challenge to enter a subjective state which cannot be verified by objective means. Further, very few would be willing to become part of a different state of mind unfamiliar to them. It is especially true of those who go as far as denying the existence of such a state. The denial of states outside of the normal consciousness, the inability to objectively verify those states, the lack of audience for the discovery, the ridicule and the labeling are all reasons not to undertake the journey.

For those who stay away from the journey, the ever-lasting problems of death remain. Death is the evil that swallows up the joyful life of the person. It is the great unknown impossible to discover. Speculation is the only avenue. For these people the description of human life Thomas Hobbes offers in his worldly philosophy becomes inevitable: "...the life of man, [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". The simplistic notion of reason versus faith remains the driving force in the life of the person in the phenomenal world where life is nasty and short and where all else is sheer speculation.

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